

The Rose's War: A Novel

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Back in high school, this novel was in a much different place. It began as *The Midnight Rose*, a novel that relied more on the action than characters. While my writing developed throughout my years at Ball State, my love for the world in *The Midnight Rose* remained. So I returned to it, rewriting it as *The Rose's War*, the first book in an intended trilogy. The novel has changed so much. Its characters are more complex, its story has more depth, and its world is more reflective of the diversity I value so much in people. The novel follows Isabella, an interracial princess grieving from the loss of three members of her family. She discovers she may be able to save those she has lost, leading to her mission to save her family and their fractured hold on their kingdom. On her journey, she realizes there is a war brewing in her region, and that she, as the heir to a power she once believed was a myth, is at the center of it. Along with telling Isabella's coming of age story, the text deals with issues of mortality, grief, diversity, second chances, duty, belief, corruption, and the complexities of a broken region. This thesis includes the first quarter of the novel, an outline of the rest of the book, a map of *The Rose's War's* world, and a character listing.

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Author's Statement

During high school, I wrote my first completed book: *The Midnight Rose*, a young adult fantasy novel. The fantasy world in the book stayed with me throughout the years. But when I looked back at the book during college, I was disappointed. I realized that, while I loved the concept, I hated the writing. The book could have been so much more than what it was. So during spring semester my junior year, I revisited the book. I started to rewrite it as *The Rose's War* for my novel writing class. The scope of the novel transformed completely, just as my writing has over the last several years. Compared to what it was before, *The Rose's War* has so much more substance and complexity. With a quarter of the novel complete, I know this will be the first finished book I write that I will be truly proud of creating.

My creative writing classes, honors courses, and internships in the publishing industry have all influenced the quality and scope of the prose. The critical thinking I have developed has enhanced the themes and characters. Working directly with books during my New York Arts Program internships at literary agency The Rights Factory and sci-fi/fantasy publisher DAW Books has helped me develop better structure and style. I know what makes a book publishable – what makes a book *good* – now, and that is helping me so much in making my own novel something that can succeed.

When I wrote *The Midnight Rose*, I did not think of the story thematically. My focus was on the action. Yet I created the basis to something that had potential to be complex with so many themes. In addition to telling Isabella's coming of age story, I narrowed down to focus on themes of mortality, grief, second chances, duty, belief, corruption, and diversity. The grief was always present with Isabella's loss, but I never truly tackled it because she so quickly discovers there is a chance her family might be alive. But in *The Rose's War*, both Isabella and Blake learn lessons

on grief throughout their stories. They each handle that grief in different ways. Isabella turns it into action, while Blake tries to escape his by finding a new family and a new home. This leads him down a dark road, but his past losses make him afraid to betray the new family that he eventually finds. Even Celia, the main antagonist of the planned trilogy deals with grief in her own way. She is the original heir to the Midnight Rose – a title that is snatched from her and given to Isabella instead – and for Celia, her grief leads her to revenge and thirst for power. Exploring grief through three characters in *The Rose's War* and later on in the trilogy makes it a much deeper and useful theme. It isn't just something that happens to the characters; it's something that changes the characters. I tried to explore all of the novel's themes through multiple characters and in multiple ways to enhance their impact and their role in the book. Multiple characters are trapped by their duty. Several characters are impacted by the corruption of others or are corrupted themselves.

In a novel that introduces more than 20 characters, it was essential for me to use all of the themes carefully to tie in every single character. I did not want any character or event in the novel to feel contrived or unnecessary. As a student, reader, and writer, I have learned how important it is to weave everything together. This resulted in me reevaluating each character. Some of the secondary characters only needed a bit of work. In some cases, I removed characters entirely or added new ones. My main work, however, was with the two primary characters, Isabella and Blake.

In *The Midnight Rose*, Isabella was much less three-dimensional. She still dealt with the grief of losing her father, brother, and fiancé to the northern pillagers. That grief was an intrinsic part of her character that made her decide to join Blake on the mission to save her family. But in *The Rose's War*, Isabella is more than her grief. The grief still affects her – it is, after all, what

drives her to try to save her family in that first place – but she finds herself split between that and how she feels the need to save her family's claim on the West Whilsan throne. With her father and brother gone, she is next in line. But in the world of *The Rose's War*, a woman cannot rule. Especially not when she is both a woman and someone with half foreign blood.

Adding in a racial complexity to Isabella's character deepens the stakes of her family's struggle to retain the throne. Her mother, Elisa, is considered foreign by the Ashford family, who is challenging her family's rule. The challenge to the throne simply did not exist in the original book. It deepens the plot, and it gives Isabella something else to want. If she had stayed home to focus on helping her family retain rule, she would have felt guilty for not trying to save those she has lost. While she does try to save those people, she is left feeling guilty on the journey for abandoning the family she knows is still alive. I took several other steps to make Isabella more three-dimensional. For one, she is in denial about the existence of magic in her land, even though she keeps seeing hints of its existence. She is something of a skeptic. Later on in the novel, when Isabella is reunited with her fiancé, there is more tension in their relationship. They have both changed since last seeing each other. In *The Midnight Rose*, they return to the same love they had before. In *The Rose's War*, their love is fractured. These new additions to the plot and new characteristics – from her skepticism to her race – have made Isabella more worthy of being the central protagonist.

Yet making Isabella interracial is about more than her family's throne and developing her character; it is the first of several steps I took in the rewrite to add diversity to the novel. Throughout my college career, I have become more in touch with diversity. Being in the Alive Campaign at Ball State, a suicide prevention and life appreciation group, has taught me to understand and respect all kinds of people. This understanding and empathy further expanded

while taking an honors colloquium focused on social justice movements. And, even more, this deepened when I threw myself headfirst into the current state of the publishing industry. It is facing something of a diversity crisis in all areas, from employees at publishing houses to diversity in authors and their characters. Learning all this made me realize just how important it was to make my characters diverse. I want readers to be able to see characters like themselves present in my writing. But somehow, in *The Midnight Rose*, there weren't even any characters like me.

Adding racial diversity to the book was huge to me. Beyond Isabella and her siblings being interracial and her mother being the novel's equivalent to Latina, I also added racial diversity to the rest of the cast. Characters like Amara, Hawk, and Vairx were originally all white, but that has changed in this rewrite. Still though, after making all of those changes and adding a deeper backstory to these characters, I didn't see myself in the book.

I am white. So how was adding racial diversity going to help me see myself? Yes, I did see myself in small ways in many of these characters, white or not. But there was a main piece that was missing: my book had no LGBTQ characters.

I am gay. When I was growing up, I sought after LGBTQ characters in books, but there were so few. They were rare – almost impossible to find. If I did find them, being LGBTQ was all they were. There was no depth to their character. Nothing set them apart. So I decided that as an author, I wanted to include LGBTQ characters, and they would be real and three-dimensional. This was the next step in making *The Rose's War* the book I wanted it to be.

While reevaluating the book, I had already improved one of the main characters: Isabella. But I had done nothing to add depth to Blake's character. In the original book, he was a lone warrior who lost most his family (his grandma was still alive). He was still an artist, but that was

a much smaller part of his identity. So I decided to push further with both of these aspects of his character. His artistic side is now more important to his character, but it is something he suppresses due to his focus on the conflict of war within his region. The main depth in Blake in *The Rose's War* still comes from him being a lone warrior. But his grandmother is also dead now, and, as a result, he has no roots to tie himself to. Because of this, he finds himself as a part of Celia's army. His journey with Isabella is all part of a mission Celia gave him. He goes on the mission because Celia and her general Vairx have become his roots. And Vairx just so happens to be his lover. Through all of this, Blake has a much more intense backstory and he is LGBTQ without it being an all-consuming part of his character. In fact, it does not even come into play until a small scene at the end of the book. In Chapter 37 (*see outline*), Vairx comes back for Blake. They embrace and hold hands as Blake leaves Isabella behind. Rather than treat Blake having a male lover as some sort of massive reveal, I wanted it to be subtle and treated as a natural part of his character.

However, I did delay this "reveal" until the near-end of the book, so I can understand some would see it as sort of a plot twist. The plot twist is not Blake's sexuality, but rather his position as part of Celia's army. Nonetheless, it was very important for me to reveal his sexual orientation so late in the book. When gay characters are included in fiction, it is common for them to subscribe to some of the typical LGBTQ stereotypes. I wanted to build Blake as a strong, independent, intelligent, conflicted, and withdrawn warrior. *That* is his identity. His identity is not that he is gay or has a male lover. That is a part of him that readers learn later on once his warrior identity has been established. Blake is so much more than his sexual orientation, but having this diverse aspect to his character makes me feel like there is yet another piece of me in this novel. It is something that I hope will help young adult readers identify with the book and its

characters. I hope that by providing readers with the kind of character I needed when I was coming to terms with my sexual orientation, I can help teach them how to be comfortable with who they are.

Even after adding in two gay characters with Blake and Vairx and adding multiple characters with racial diversity, I didn't feel like I was doing quite enough. Diversity is monumentally important to me, so it was important for me to do more. So I added an entirely new character: Eretri. Eretri is a genderqueer. Rather than identifying as a male or a female, Eretri simply identifies as Eretri. No gender is needed, because Eretri does not identify as a girl or a boy. Although I have read a ton of young adult novels, I have come across almost no characters who are gender minorities. There is a severe lack of transgender, gender fluid, and genderqueer characters in literature. In Chapter 19, the reader is introduced to Eretri. The excerpt from the book's outline below provides detail on Eretri's backstory:

"[Isabella] runs into the blacksmith Eretri, a genderqueer of color. Eretri tells Isabella about life in the Northern Territory, and how the Threaders planned to execute Eretri before the blacksmith was able to escape to Rose Island. The people on the island accepted Eretri as one of their own, and the blacksmith was freed of the judgment and persecution faced on the mainland."

A large part of Eretri's character is the abuse and judgment that genderqueer people face. It plays a massive part in this character's backstory. Being Rose Island's blacksmith gives Eretri a bigger role though. As a prominent character, Eretri is the creator of Rose Island's weaponry and armor, and Eretri also creates the special weapons that help the allies turn the tide in the major battle toward the end of the novel. Again, I wanted this LGBTQ character to be more than just the genderqueer label.

Looking closer at diversity, I also noticed a huge lack of intersectionality in diverse literature. If a character was black, that was usually all that set them apart as a part of the diverse population. If a character was gay, they were most certainly white. So that is why I made Eretri not only genderqueer, but also a person of color. Intersectionality is huge because there are so many people who are unprivileged in more ways than one, yet they likely never see their varied identities intersect. There is so rarely a character like them. Eretri is my effort to provide that for some readers.

In addition to adding diversity and plot complexity, I think the writing itself of *The Rose's War* is much improved compared to *The Midnight Rose*. The years of experience and classes have allowed me to become a much better writer, and that alone made all the difference for this book. Of course, growth in writing over several years is no surprise. What I find to be of true value is how much more thoughtful I have become as a writer. When I first wrote *The Midnight Rose*, the idea of rewriting an entire book seemed preposterous to me. I even ignored the value of revision. Since starting *The Rose's War* in spring 2015, I have done everything that I once refused to do. I took a story that needed rewriting and completely reevaluated it. I stripped down the plot and characters, reexamined the characters' traits and backstories, and I added a host of new complications, characters, and themes to deepen the story. I went through stages of revision with other writing students, professors, and friends. I took the time to put my novel out there so I could receive that feedback. And most importantly, I took that feedback into consideration to continue building the strength of my writing.

Since I have only written a quarter of *The Rose's War*, I have a lot of writing and revision left. But now I have a complete outline and a basis that I think will produce a well-written novel. Through this project, I have learned to recognize my weaknesses as a writer – such as my

tendency to hurry in the story rather than taking the time to slowly world build – and I am working toward improving in those areas. One way that I am doing this is by taking the time to consider providing myself and my readers with resources. Once upon a time, I refused to write outlines. But now, I have a relatively detailed outline for the rest of *The Rose's War*, along with massive documents of notes in my phone and on my computer, a map of the region, and a listing of characters. My writing has become structured and planned without removing the free flowing creativity that made me love the craft. Because of this, my writing is cleaner, more purposeful, and more tightly bound.

Finally I have reached a point with this story in which I feel that not a single plot point, character, or theme is gratuitous. Young adult literature is the genre that I have fallen in love with as a reader. While I have written *The Rose's War*, I have fallen in love with the young adult literature genre as a writer as well.

The Rose's War

Chapters 1-10

Chapter 1

Isabella could not help but see the suitors who hunted her as the same creatures who hunted her fiancé Liam. The only difference was that she knew her suitors would fail. They lunged at her with their sly, overconfident grins, pristine clothing, and sculpted faces. She could almost hear the gold coins clicking together in their pockets as they neared her.

She maneuvered through the garden, avoiding the crowd full of men and feeling like a rodent scurrying through the forest to escape its predator. Isabella then fled up the staircase leading to the back door of the Royal Court, feeling eyes all over her. The grand garden took up several acres of space behind the court, and Isabella only wanted to go inside and escape. From every corner of the garden, she felt the hungry eyes of the suitors, the sympathetic eyes of her friends, and the frustrated eyes of her mother. And those frustrated eyes were coming closer, chasing her up the stairs as she chased the fading prospect of solace on the night that meant to banish her loneliness.

“Isabella, where are you going? You’ve barely spoken to any of these young men. You must give them a chance,” her mother Elisa said, a cross between a scold and a plea.

Isabella kept holding onto the ruffles of her buoyant red dress. The dress seemed to float outside of her thin, demure body, moving on its own like the liveliness of her brunette hair, styled in curls uncharacteristic to her. She preferred simpler clothes and straighter hair. She enjoyed the brightness the makeup brought to her face – she had forgotten how her face looked like with love of life running through it – but all in all, she felt plastered up as a trophy for the men to gaze upon, to critique, prowl on after.

Twice a year when it had an eligible heir, the royal family hosted the Queen’s Ball. Given the amount of death in Isabella’s family over the years, they felt it best to have it in the court

garden rather than let so many people into their own home, the West Manor. Leading up to that day, Elisa spoke to suitor after suitor, analyzing their style of clothing, their family's background, their personality, and demeanor. All to determine which men deserved a chance at Isabella's hand in marriage. The prospects Elisa deemed appropriate were all invited to the ball. But Isabella had very different feelings about these prospects.

"You cannot keep pushing men away," Elisa said, finally close enough to Isabella to hold her daughter's shoulder—an attempt to comfort her. "I am sorry, but Liam is not coming back."

The princess shook off her mother's hand and walked on ahead.

At the top of the stairs and near the door, Isabella could see the entire garden. Cool shades of red—both from decorations and plants—showed pride for their country of West Whilsan and a hope to conjure romance. Isabella found comfort in the cold marble of the balcony's rail. Her world was much larger than this decorated space, but this time she was stuck to the garden, stuck to tradition. With Liam, she broke the rules. She fell in love outside the ball, she fell in love outside the country. With Liam, of East Whilsan, she saw a world beyond the garden, beyond the capital city.

But she also saw flames and black-hooded menaces. She lost her fiancé, father, and brother to the rogues, and her only revenge was feigning happiness at a ball full of recommended replacements. She couldn't even do that.

Her mother's words caused the reoccurring memory that haunted her night after night to reverberate through her mind. It had been more than half a year since Liam was taken, killed, by the rouges to the north. The first Queen's Ball just two months after that was the biggest failure of them all, but her mother had hoped this one would be different.

"I only want what is best for you, my dear."

Isabella looked at the pain in her mother's eyes, weighed down by exhaustive guilt. She wanted to scream at her mother for not allowing her to forget, for forcing her to stay grounded in reality. But she didn't. The princess had tried to take care of Elisa since her king's death, and, once again, this is what she found herself doing. Isabella nodded.

"So you'll try?"

"I will give them a chance. But for you, not for them," Isabella said.

Elisa gave her a nod of approval and a small smile before walking back down the stairs. Isabella remained atop the stairs, still desiring a second of solitude. She may give these men a chance, but she would never let them in like Liam.

As Isabella watched her mother descend the left staircase, she did not notice a young man ascending to her right.

"Princess?" One of the suitors. "Excuse me for interrupting your time alone."

Isabella turned to face him. His voice was still masculine, but there was a sense of urgency in it and in his expression that made him seem more genuine than the others and their magnanimous greed. He seemed to be her age – unlike many of the suitors – and his face was rugged in its scars and edges, but youthful in its eyes and proportions. His short blonde hair was pushed back in a failed attempt to formalize it, but Isabella appreciated the imperfection.

"That's all right, I was only collecting my thoughts," she said. "I am Isabella."

He grinned and nodded at the name he already knew. "Blake," he said.

It was when he took his next breath that Isabella knew the urgency in his voice was not for her. His face grew more serious; he was here for a reason other than her hand.

"I'm not here to pursue you like the rest of these grimy men," he said. Isabella stifled a grin. "I'm here to tell you something. I've tried to explain this to many people, including King Ceylon, but he pushed me away even harder than the others."

Isabella turned back to the crowd below to find Ceylon Ashford, the interim king put in place after the death of her father and brother. He was an intelligent man, and one Isabella had respected, but as of late he had latched more attentively toward power. She was not surprised Ceylon had pushed Blake away.

"Liam is alive."

Fire had burned throughout the city; fire had singed Isabella's skin. Rogues had advanced brutally in the capital; rogues had stolen away a blood-stained, corpse of a man three years in a row, but none of them looked as unforgivably lost as Liam did.

"That's impossible," Isabella responded, half reflex, half disbelief.

"I was up north," he said. "I saw a squad of those men moving and guarding this big cart. It was much better defended than any supply cart that I've seen, so I was curious. When I snuck closer, I swore I heard one of them growl 'prince.' At that point, I hurried to a higher vantage point, hoping I could see what was inside. I reached the top of a tree a bit ahead of them, and just waited. As they passed below me, I saw him stashed inside between bags of what must've been supplies."

"That doesn't make sense. How could you even know Liam?"

"A long time ago, he was one of my best friends."

Isabella shook her head. Liam never mentioned a Blake.

"Did you ever go to King Leon of East Whilsan? Surely he would be more sympathetic than Ceylon?" she asked.

"I am not well-liked in East Whilsan," he said. "I've avoided that country for a long time."

"And yet my mother trusted you enough to invite you to the ball?"

"I wasn't invited." This statement seemed to retrigger his need to be careful and unseen, because he quickly scanned the room, seeing Elisa watching him curiously.

Isabella stared at the perimeter of the garden, thick with guards, but she noticed a few holes. The Queen's Ball wasn't as well-protected as she had believed.

"Look, Isabella. I have to go before someone realizes I do not belong here. But I need you to come with me. We can find Liam together. You're the only person left that I can trust."

"You want me to find him? Those rogues trampled our entire military three separate times! Year after year, even when we had prepared to fight them." Isabella's voice trembled with anger, fear, and a brooding disdain for herself for still refusing to believe Blake's words. "How do you think the two of us alone could save anyone?"

"You have little faith in me," Blake said grimly. "Understandable. I'll give you time to think it over. We'll meet tonight near the south gate. Mull it over until then."

He turned and casually descended the stairs, leaving the ball. She was surprised at how his nerves faded as he fled. Most eyes were on Isabella, but many moved to follow the man who had tried to talk to her as he exited. To anyone else, it would simply seem as if she wasn't interested. Isabella did not trust him, but she trusted what he said.

With new thoughts racing chaotically in her mind, Isabella knew the Queen's Ball would not be a success – not that she hadn't felt that way in the beginning. But this new idea had demolished any remote chance of a suitor capturing her attention.

She climbed down the steps, and, instead of waiting for another suitor's chance at the limelight, she searched for her much-younger siblings, Selli and William. It was not difficult, for they were scavenging the table of hor d'oeuvres like rabbits in the garden.

"Isa!" William, the youngest, instantly shouted in glee as she neared them. His face was coated in several sauces, and this was enough to transform Isabella's concerns into a smile. A laugh was farfetched, but a smile was possible.

"You two need to clean up a bit," she said, beginning to wipe their faces with the napkins in the center of the table, which luckily had a red tablecloth; the white would have stained much faster.

"Did you find a pretty man?" Selli asked.

"Not yet, Selli," Isabella said, her smile now faded.

"Well that's because you haven't met me," a man interrupted in his overconfidence and rashness.

Isabella turned to see a man who did indeed look "pretty," but he was far from the sort that interested her. His drinking drove his actions.

"You're especially pretty for an Ocelena girl," he said.

As he neared Isabella, she smelled the ale on his breath and the hazard of a look of invincibility in his eyes. She was used to being insulted due to the olive complexion she inherited from her mother, who was born in the southern country Ocelena. Most people were too afraid to insult a princess, but for some reason, people were not shy in bringing up her race.

But it wasn't that comment that ignited her anger. He reached forward, caressing the burn mark on her left cheek. The burn that masqueraded along her left side, leaving her an alarming reminder each day of the tragedy she endured.

Not of reflex, but intention, she swung her hand, slapping his face with an aggression unlike that of the dainty princess the man saw her to be. The force knocked the drunken stupor of a man off balance. It left a mark redder than the burn he so foolishly touched.

"See yourself out. I'm not one for a drunk," Isabella said.

He hobbled away, a few men forcing him along in an attempt to garner Isabella's approval. She ignored them.

The princess felt the fire that had grazed her cheek return, this time burning on the inside rather than against her skin. This man had thought of nothing but his desires and his havoc. He was a rogue, drunk and foolish, and he had tried to infiltrate her life. She would not let another mark her in the way that the fire had when it licked her flesh.

One of the West Manor guards reached for Isabella's hand, but she brushed it away and stepped out of the carriage herself. Elisa and the children followed her closely, all three evidently concerned after the incident that closed the Queen's Ball.

"I assure you that man will be punished, dear," Elisa said in a weak attempt at consolation.

"I assured you those men were of the wrong intentions, and that didn't change anything. As far as I'm concerned, this night was meant with red faces from the start," Isabella replied. She turned to look at her mother, and the empathy written on Isabella's face spoke to Elisa more than her words, "I'm truly sorry that all of your work only led us here."

Elisa nodded and, unsure what to say back, began walking toward the manor. Her family followed close after. Isabella could not decide if she was amused or upset that the man who barely caused her distress would be punished. Meanwhile, the creatures from the north that

caused her day after day of anguish remained unpunished, living comfortably in their homes. Nothing they had done had come back to haunt them.

The guard that stood at the massive maroon door reached for the handle. Pulling the door open, he revealed the inside of the luxurious manor, already lit by the servants to welcome the royal family back home. Even though Ceylon was acting as interim king, it was still Isabella's now-figurehead family that received the royal treatment. Most people still acted as if Elisa and her children were in power. There were dissenters, of course – there were always dissenters – but her family won out in the end, even after all of the pain it had suffered from its losses. Isabella's older brother James had only held the throne for a year after her father had been killed. Then the rogues stole the throne from yet another when they killed James, leaving no suitable of-age male heirs in Isabella's family. So the role went straight to Ceylon, one of the family's most prominent advisers.

As the two women climbed the carpeted stairs, reminiscent in color to the décor at the ball, they remained silent. They walked in the same direction, with the same pace, but their eyes stared off and away from each other. Even with the buffer of the carpet, their steps pounded loud against their ears in the quiet. These were stairs they climbed each day, but this time, it was as if the staircase had doubled in size.

Isabella thought of the time wasted on the ball. She thought of the way her mother sulked, wallowing in her failure. And she thought of how she could fix things for her mother, yet she knew it was too late.

"It's too bad Ceylon's son couldn't attend," Elisa said. "He was the best of the bunch."

Isabella had been so deep within her own mind that she heard her mother's words as just another thought in her head. When she realized how much she disagreed with the idea, she

recognized it as her mother's voice and not her own. She stopped moving for the smallest moment before continuing up the stairs, but it was enough time for her mother to notice that their pace had fallen out of rhythm. Elisa was now half a step ahead of Isabella.

"You know, you don't even need the ball," Elisa said, her body rigid and uncomfortable in part from the conversation, but also because she was trying to slow her pace slightly enough to return in line with her daughter. "Let's set something up. Ceylon would app—"

"Stop."

Elisa did. Not just with her words, but with her legs. She snapped back into the moment and began moving again, but was already a full step behind Isabella. It was too late.

"The Ashford family has changed since taking power," Isabella said. "At least Narek has."

Isabella's one-step lead almost protected her from her mother's reaction. But Elisa grimaced in hurt, and her daughter saw peripherally the look on her mother's face. The grimace stung, salt in an open wound.

One foot reached the landing at the top of the staircase.

"But Isabella..."

Isabella placed her second foot on the landing and turned sharply. Her room was to the right, and her mother's was to the left. She did not want to snap at her mother anymore that night. Instead, she would focus on the new business she had to attend to.

But her mother just watched her walk off. She stood one step down from the top of the stairs.

After successfully finding a set of dark, maneuverable clothes, Isabella sighed in satisfaction. She dressed and then walked across the expansive, lavishly decorated room to grab the bag of supplies she left on her bed – she didn't know if they would be leaving that night or not. In fact, she didn't know what to expect at all. For all she knew, he wouldn't even be waiting for her when she arrived at the south gate. It could have been a trick, a lie, or her mind imagining things in a desperate grasp for hope.

A sudden brush of wind and the sound of another's foot touching the floor, she reached under her bed, pulling a hidden sword out – thinner than an average blade but thicker than a rapier – and flipped around to face the source of the noise. A dark hood concealed her assailant's face, and the glimmering sword in his hand became her focus. She tried to push the memory of the northern rogues from her mind. The dark hood was reminiscent of the creatures, shrouded in the comfortable villainy.

The assailant swung his sword up and sent it crashing down toward Isabella. She whisked her blade forward, blocking the attack with the flat of the blade, her hand on the sword's fuller to support her defense. She slid her sword back, rotating, and letting her enemy's sword fall in front of her. Hand hard on the hilt's grip, she slammed her weapon's pommel into the attacker's wrist.

His sword dropped down onto the ground, the metal clinking lightly as Isabella enjoyed her short moment of success. He grabbed her wrist with his free hand, clenching the perfect pressure points to force her to drop her blade as well, but with his injured hand, he gracefully prevented a second weapon from colliding with the floor.

"You're good," the assailant said.

Isabella felt the continued skyrocketing of her heartrate pulse up, like a room's temperature soars as fire catches. She waited, feeling death by her own blade near. She had come close, but not enough.

The attacker pulled back his hood, and Isabella's anxious tension snapped to rage as she saw Blake's scarred face. He was grinning.

"What in the name of Great Wiles made you think that was a good idea?" she spat, her face boiling the same color red as her bedspread – maroon as most things were in the royal family's home.

"I needed to test you. To make sure you could handle this journey," he said, with a calm of ignorance, as if nothing had happened.

"Get out."

He stared at her, the calm on his face twitching with his curving brows.

"I said get out!"

"You have to understand, Isabella. I needed to know you could hold your own," he said, rushing to find the right words before he could think them through. "You did. You were amazing. You're ready!"

"I don't need you to tell me I'm ready. And I most certainly don't think I'm *ready* to go running through the country with a man who came through my window, armed in the night," Isabella growled through clenched teeth.

Blake shook his head, some of his calm returning. "I'll be in town until tomorrow night. Come find me near the Capital Bell Tower if you change your mind."

He fled through the window, moving as quickly and silently as he did before. She looked out into the cold night to find him. She only felt the breeze brush her neck as she heard him step somewhere in their expanding separation.

Earlier that day, she would have never imagined herself giving up on a chance to save her beloved Liam.

Chapter 2

As with most mornings, Isabella began her day by running her fingers along the smooth wood of her headboard. She felt the letters of her name intermixed with flowers and carefully carved designers. Her finger curved through the “s” and slid up each “l.” But it stopped suddenly at the center of the “a.” Unfinished, unsmoothed. She felt the wood’s now-rough texture against her skin. There was a faint outline, a start of the letter. But Liam had not had the time to finish it.

She exhaled and began to get ready for the day. Putting on one of her innumerable and elegant dresses, drawing life onto her tired face, designing her hair in complex arrangements – or rather, like that morning, just retouching her hair from the night before. A princess did not have the luxury to spend a moment not looking prim and proper. She never knew when she would walk downstairs early in the morning to find an important guest speaking to her other or even waiting for Isabella.

And of course, when Isabella headed downstairs to the sun room so that the light can awaken her, she heard the voice of the most important guest of all: King Ceylon Ashford.

Isabella walked up to the door, happy to see that both Ceylon and Elisa’s backs were to her. Neither would see her as they looked out into the sunny garden, comfortable in the expensive chairs but suffering in the brooding tension.

“It is clear that the throne will end up as my family’s sooner than I first thought,” Ceylon said. “If Isabella fails to find a spouse soon, then there is no reason to keep your family in power. It’s been a year since you had a grip on this country.”

Isabella remembered how close her father and Ceylon had been – they were like brothers. It had been her father’s hope all along that she would marry Ceylon’s son Narek so that the families could join. Then she fell in love with Liam, and that plan fell apart.

"The people still favor us," Elisa said, her voice a twist of shaking anxiety and billowing rage.

"You think they favor the damaged, sitting ducks more than they trust the family that has actually moved this country forward this past year? You think they enjoy watching your family walk around in elegant clothing and enjoy every pleasantry while you do nothing at all?" Even from behind, Isabella could see the sickening grin growing on Ceylon's face. "The people want the royal family to be the one that guides them, that guides their lives. They want my family in this house."

"This house, rule over this country – it is my family's right!" Elisa stood from her chair, her legs nearly shaking with the same

"Your family has only had the throne for fifteen years. This country is fifteen years old! You think the people care about a royal family that's been in power less time than the minimum age for the throne? Your monarchy is an infant."

Elisa fell back into her chair as if the gravity's hold was too powerful for her to handle, her legs buckling in an inability to defend herself any longer.

"But Isabella can rule," she muttered.

"Isabella?!" he scoffed, his laugh erupted like an explosion in the manor. "A female ruler is a joke in itself, but her? She wanted to marry the prince of East Whilsan, our greatest rival. She would've given them the country we fought to create. You think the people trust her judgment? Sure, she's less of an Ocelena than you, but she's tainted nonetheless. The only way she will live in power is if she marries my son. And, let us be honest with each other, as foolish as she is, he is the only man in this country fit for her."

Without Isabella's father, her older brother, and Liam, whichever man Isabella married would join her on the throne. But Ceylon was right. A ruling queen was a joke: the man Isabella married would have all the power. That is why Ceylon wanted her to marry Narek. Not because of Ceylon and her father's former friendship. He wanted the marriage for his family's power.

Ceylon stood and began to turn toward the door. Elisa quickly rose again and looked after him. In the second before Isabella started to move, to hide, she saw the fluid plague of desperation darkening her mother's face like an eclipse. Her mother could have driven her to tears.

But Isabella quietly thundered into the kitchen, escaping the scene. Still, Elisa and Ceylon were loud enough for her to hear the conversation's conclusion.

"You want our family's to merge?" Elisa asked, in wonder despite only yesterday suggesting Isabella go after Narek.

"It doesn't really matter if my family wants it. I don't mind. But if your family wants to keep any drop of power, your daughter needs my son," Ceylon said, satisfaction ringing like a bell.

The Bell Tower. Isabella had to go the Capital Bell Tower.

"You should be honored that my family is willing to help erase the taint of your foreign blood," Ceylon spat.

Isabella rummaged through the kitchen, receiving several offers of food from the cooks – she took the offered scone and scrambled eggs, a hungry void in her stomach despite her tense nerves – and made herself look busy. When she emerged back in the hall connecting the kitchen to the sunroom, she saw her mother waiting. Foot tapping, eyes glaring. She hid her distraught mind well, the only hint being the slight welling up of tears beneath her eyes.

"You were listening, weren't you?" Elisa asked. "I know you go to the sunroom each morning before you get your food."

Elisa pointed at the plate Isabella held guiltily yet hungrily in her right hand.

"I'm sorry, but I was a huge part of that conversation," Isabella said. "Wasn't I?"

Her mother walked toward her, gently taking the plate from her hand and placing it on the table displaying pictures of the family, fallen and alive, that stood against the wall next to them. She grasped her daughter's shoulders, the form of her hands and the tense grip evoking the deep remorse but need in her request.

"You need to reconsider Narek. He is our only chance," Elisa begged. "We've already lost enough."

Isabella looked at her mother and saw the memory of the three raids in her eyes. The loss of her husband, son, and soon-to-be son-in-law. Her mother often tried to hide her feelings, to stay strong, but she was so deeply broken, destroyed.

"We have more choice than you think," Isabella said with assurance.

She pulled her mother close in a sudden and speedy embrace, before reaching for the scone and hurrying out of the manor before saying another word.

Early in the day, people were already bustling throughout the city, crowds full of different sized groups moving at different speeds to their typical destinations – the market, the shop district, and to the square that was home to the Capital Bell Tower. Isabella, dressed in atypical princess garb – a long blouse and black silk pants – followed the groups heading to the square. The scone was gone before she realized it, and she felt naked with nothing in her hands. She was used to having to hold onto the frills of her outstretching dresses, or to be carrying a

package, or a basket, or something at all. Instead, she kept her hands at her sides, her lack of something to hold making her feel all the more unprepared for the conversation she was about to have. But instinct had brought her out the door of the Royal Manor, and it would take her in spontaneous fashion to the Capital Bell Tower. Then she would find Blake among the several buildings in the square. She wished he would have said exactly where he would be, but he had no idea what time of day to expect her. He could be moving around the area. Or, he just did not want her to know his exact location in case she, out of fear, decided to send the royal guard after him. She realized it was likely that she would go to him, but he would be the one to find her.

The group in front of Isabella slowed to a near halt. She looked from side to side, seeing people stopping at the carts full of food and craft along the road; there was really nowhere to turn. Then Isabella noticed eyes squinting at her, and found them to be Selli's. As soon as Selli noticed that she caught Isabella's attention, she dashed toward her, provoking anxiety in the servant who had been passively watching her.

"Sister!" Selli said, ramming into Isabella's stomach in a hug.

"Selli, what are you doing out here?"

"The kitchen was out of eggs, and I said I would go get some." Selli smiled, proud.

"That's so sweet of you," Isabella said. "I've got to get going though, Selli."

"We can play later!" Selli grinned wider this time, practically skipping her way back to the servant.

"I'm sure we will," Isabella said.

But this was a promise she didn't know if she could keep. She felt solemn, alone, as if just the idea of leaving to find Liam constructed a wall of separation between her and her family. The distance would be a much greater barrier than any wall, but Isabella did not expect to feel

this anxious so soon. She had been bound to this country, to the city, and nearly bound to the manor and her family, all her life. And now she planned to leave it all without saying a word.

Isabella stopped looking after her sister and began persisting in her journey through the crowds of the vibrant capital. In a short time, she noticed that Selli's eyes had not been the only ones on her. Though Isabella had more freedom than her parents tried to give her – and the people knew that – they were always surprised and always stared when she roamed the city on her own. The princess was surprised the queen had not sent someone after her.

And she almost wished Elisa had when she noticed Narek, tall and triumphant in his buoyant overconfidence. He wore clothes more elegant than the men had at the Queen's Ball, flaunting his exponential wealth that directly followed his family's still growing influence. The smirk on his face told Isabella that he had seen her wading through the crowd minutes before. He had just been waiting, a lion eyeing its unaware prey. And she felt just that way; she doubted he saw her as anything more than prey. She was an opportunity for him to solidify his family's rule, to make the sturdy unbreakable and the immortal permanent.

If a servant had been at Isabella's side, perhaps she could have created a distraction and avoided him. Or she would at least not have to face him alone. But she had little choice. He stood just under the Capital Bell Tower, the tallest building in the capital. The stonework boasted its artistry, the delicate carving and polishing sending Isabella's mind flashing to Liam's hand carved designs on her headboard. Even though he wasn't supposed to ever be in West Whilsan spending time with Isabella, he had done so often. Each time, he asked to go to the Bell Tower to admire its intricacies. He had a passion for this elegant blend of handiwork and art.

As Isabella stepped up to Narek, the bell rang in coincidental welcoming.

"You look ravishing as always," he greeted.

"And you're overdressed," she replied. "Not at all a surprise."

There it was again: his damning smirk.

"Your mother let me know you were wandering the city. I figured, this being one of your favorite spots and all, that you might come here," he said. "I know this place has... significance to you."

His eyes scoffed at her with their scorn. Narek, like many others, had disdain for her "foolishness" for falling for a man they believed was only using her to bring the two torn twin countries back together.

"My mother?" she said in disappointment.

Elisa had sent someone after her, but she had sent the last person Isabella could have hoped for. The queen was not just going to leave her family's fate to Isabella's decision; she was going to push this arrangement upon her.

Isabella did not bother wondering how her mother had contacted Narek quickly enough for him to arrive before her, because she knew the power of two royal families outmatched the impotence of the wandering princess. Narek could have arrived before her any place she would have fled to, in or out of the city. She was not just bound to this city because it was her home, but because it would not let her go.

She wondered how Blake would succeed in plotting her escape.

With her eyes darting about the square, she decided she would be better off moving around and looking than she would just waiting to find Blake standing in her vision. Narek would continue talking – in his strange mix of disparaging and flirting – whether she stood or moved away. So she began circling the Bell Tower, slow but purposefully, and she analyzed the crowds around her, looking for scars and blond hair.

"You know, Narek," she said. "If you're trying to convince me to marry you, it would help if you tried to pain me less."

"Oh, Princess. You seem distracted. What is it you're searching for?"

She turned back for a moment, unintentionally seeing him rather than the crowds she was examining, and she almost cringed as the crowd almost parted completely for him. They barely moved for her. The farther from the Royal Manor, the less people seemed to take heed to her presence.

"What I'm searching for is the place you won't follow me."

He laughed. "There's not a single place in this country where I wouldn't go after you."

The tone in his voice was not one of loving, but one of a guard to his prisoner.

"Lucky for me that won't be the case next time you have to business to attend to outside of this country," Isabella said.

She curved suddenly, close enough to the Bell Tower to touch it. Placing her hand against it, she moved her hand along the grooves of the cold stone, only warmed lightly by the touch of the sun's rays. She felt Narek's breath against her neck as he too moved his hand along the stone behind her. But in this slower movement, she took the time to focus her thoughts and to actually think about where Blake could be.

"Then we best hurry with our courting, for I have business outside this country tomorrow," he said.

"Why didn't you just stay where you were if you were going to leave again?"

"Because a suitor cannot be a suitor if he never sees his princess."

Her eyes focused in on the bar and tavern, the only suitable place for a man to stay in the square during his visit. And so she marched toward the building, one of the few that used wood

heavily in its construction rather than just stone or brick. Her brother, James – the one that she had lost – always spent his free afternoons with his friends in the bar, surrounding a table full of cards with their hands full of drink. Before even entering, Isabella saw him there through the window, glee written on his face. But she would never see that scene again without her imagination aiding her vision.

“Well, Princess, it’s a bit early for a drink. Don’t you think?” Narek said, laughing yet again. “But if this is what you want, maybe we’re more suited to each other than I thought.”

“By the lack of perception you have in judging my intentions, I’d say we’re even less suited to each other than I thought,” Isabella almost hissed as she pulled the tavern door open, failing in her attempt to close it off from him. He grabbed the door before she could even pull it back.

A few friends waved at Isabella, greeted her, and she responded as quickly as she could without losing her kindness. She would not waste her anger or frustration on anyone but Narek.

Her eyes first moved to the spot by the window where she imagined James and his friends. No one sat there. Then she wandered between tables, paying special attention to the corners and the tables in the back. Blake was not at a table, not on a barstool, not against a wall.

“Would you like something to drink, Princess Isabella?” the barkeep asked as she walked along the row of bar stools.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’m just trying to find someone.”

The barkeep was about to ask about this, but then he noticed Narek close behind her.

“And you, Prince Narek? A drink?”

Isabella felt nauseous at the notion of her being a princess and Narek being a prince.

While in some ways it was true at the time, she hated its association and prediction.

Narek stopped for a moment to say, "I appreciate it, sir, but I too must be off."

In this second, Isabella flipped around a woman near her, one seemed would have a particular interest in the "Prince." She whispered to the woman, "He's looking for a lady." Then, as the woman headed toward the man already distracted by the barkeep, Isabella rushed out of the bar. It was not a particularly successful distraction, but it was successful enough to give her the moment she needed to begin rushing toward the Capital Bell Tower.

Blake was not an obvious man. He had snuck into the Queen's Ball without invitation. He had snuck into the Royal Manor without permission. He would not pay to stay in a tavern amongst the typical traveling men and drinkers. He would sneak into yet another landmark of the capital. When he said Isabella could find him near the Capital Bell Tower, what he meant was that she could find him inside.

More focused on making haste than being careful, Isabella rushed through the crowds to further distance herself from Narek. The people here looked at him, not at her, but in this moment that was to her advantage.

She reached the tower and ran along the walls until she found the guard that stood in front of the tower's door each and every day. He knew Isabella, and she knew him.

"Please, can I enter the tower?" she asked, trying to suppress the anxiety and rush that would arouse suspicion. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about it all day."

"Of course, Princess. You're always welcome to enter, being royal as you are," he said with a wink.

Isabella smiled back, giving a glance to her surroundings to see that Narek had yet to reach her. He might not even know where she was going. As the guard opened the door, Isabella thought for a moment about how exactly Blake would have gotten inside, but she suspected she

would find out soon enough. After all, as soon as she closed the door behind her, she heard a voice echoing along the stairwell.

"This is sooner than I expected you to come, Isabella."

Chapter 3

Isabella didn't have to walk up the curving, stone stairs before she felt Blake's presence seeping through the walls. He wasn't just waiting here; this is where he had spent all of his time in the capital. As she climbed the stairs, his voice grew louder.

"So, this means you've changed your mind then?" he asked.

"Maybe you shouldn't be assuming it's me. This is the perfect method to get yourself in trouble," she said.

"Well, considering the only person who ever comes inside the tower is the guard at the beginning and end of the day, I wasn't too concerned."

"What about maintenance? That bell doesn't just keep itself working," she said.

She reached the top, where Blake sat against the door that opened to the top. He had a pad of paper on his chest, a quill dripping wet in his hand as if her arrival paralyzed him in the transition of wetting the quill and wetting the page.

"The bell sounds like it's working just fine to me," he said with a laugh.

Isabella remembered the bell ringing as she confronted Narek, loud and powerful.

"So what exactly made you choose a bell tower to stay in of all places?" she asked.

"If you didn't know the answer to that question, you wouldn't be here," he replied. The ink on the quill dropped onto his page, marking whatever writing or drawing he had done. He put the quill back into the ink, letting it rest there. "Now let's talk about why you came here. You finally trust me?"

Isabella was far from trusting him, but it didn't feel right to divulge that information to the man she was about to embark on a potentially useless rescue mission with.

"I'm here because I need to return the throne to my family."

"Leaving the country whose throne you're trying to get back doesn't sound like the smartest plan." He pulled the quill back out and continued his work, making long strokes against the yellowing paper — maybe it was only yellow against the weak light of the candles dispersed throughout the small room.

"They want me to be married, and there's only one man I'm marrying."

He continued adding in the strokes. As his hand moved from top to bottom, curve to line, Isabella realized he could not have been writing. But she could not imagine what else he could be so laboriously crafting. He did not seem like a man with an artistic hand.

"Standing there doing nothing won't get you anywhere."

"I'm waiting for you to say something. You seemed like you knew how to handle this journey."

"I do," he said. He lifting the paper, turning it to face her. He waved the page at her, revealing some sort of diagram of map. "Come here and I'll show you."

She began to walk toward him, and he pushed aside the small pile of pages to his left, making room for her to sit. The idea of sitting that close to him didn't sit well with her, but she forced herself to fight the part of her that opposed him. If she was going on this journey with him, she knew some small part of her had to trust him. She had to rely on that part of her now. So she sat down next to him. He continued moving the quill along the page, adding details to the intricate pathways and borders that defined the map. But he wasn't just adding structure to better detail the map. He was taking the time to give life to the great trees that filled the Crescent Forest, so accurately recreated on the map that Isabella knew what it was even before he added labels.

"You know they aren't just going to let me out of the city," Isabella said. "Getting to the Crescent Forest won't be simple."

She reached to touch the map, but he swiped her hand away instantly. "You'll smear the ink," he said. "And I know they won't let you out that easily. That's why we're going here."

He touched a spot of the map in the capital, where the Royal Court was – the place where the Queen's Ball had taken place.

"So you can smear the ink then?"

He laughed. "This part is dry." He continued drawing in trees in the forest.

"Well, what's there then?" she asked, ignoring his laughter.

"There's an underground tunnel near the Royal Court. If we can get inside, then we have a save way south out of the city."

She looked closer at the map, seeing a line that stretched well more than halfway to the border. It was almost touching the country of Ails to the south.

"This goes in the exact opposite direction of the Northern Territory," she said. "This will take several days longer, at least a week."

"Any other way we go, we'd have to smuggle you out of the capital. Even if we did that, we'd have to make it across the entire country without you being seen," he explained. "This is the only way. Even disguised, you're an easy target."

She pushed herself off the ground, eager to create some space between the two of them.

"I'm not an easy target," she said. "Now where should I meet you tonight? At the Royal Court?"

"You're eager to go," he said, laughing once again. "I'll meet you at the Royal Court one hour after the patrolmen leave. I'm sure as the princess you know their schedule."

She nodded and hurriedly moved down the stairs. When she opened the door and left the bell tower, the guard looked at her curiously. He was friendly, but this visit of hers was atypically short. They nodded at each other, and she began walking back home. Narek was nowhere to be seen.

Moonlight illuminating her otherwise dark bedroom, Isabella continued putting items into her mid-sized brown leather bag. She had already filled her larger bag with her things, but then she immediately emptied it again. She could not carry so much for such a long distance. It would only slow them. So she put fewer clothes and forced herself to be pickier with her food. She took extra gold to pay for what she could not carry later on.

Finished, she left the bag on her bed and walked toward her full length mirror. Her hair was still styled in the traditional curls her mother liked. She began untying, unknotting, unstyling. Simple hair would better suit the journey.

“What’s that bag?”

Startled, Isabella spun around to see William standing near her bed. He reached his small hands up toward the strap of the bag, but his short arms could not reach it. Isabella looked toward her door, surprised she never heard him, and she saw how tiny the opening was. William was much quieter than the other boys his age; maybe Isabella should not have been surprised by his unnoticeable movements.

“Oh, I’m just dropping a few things off tomorrow. I thought it’d be easier to put it in a bag than to carry it,” she lied.

William nodded. He jumped slightly to try and reach the strap, and Isabella went to sit on the bed next to the bag. He then began to tap her leg instead.

“What are you doing up, little Will?” she asked, pulling him up to her lap. He was not a baby anymore, but she never stopped treating him like one. His quiet demeanor helped with that.

“I can’t sleep, Isa,” he said. “Can I sleep here?”

“Well, little Will, I think I’ll be up pretty late. I don’t want to keep you up,” Isabella said, and his face sank in response. “Why don’t I stay with you until you fall asleep?” Back up his face rose.

She lifted him as she stood, taking him just two doors down to his room – Selli’s room was between them. His room was darker than hers, only a sliver of moonlight sneaking in to light it. That had to be part of the reason he couldn’t sleep. He was scared. So Isabella put him into bed, tucked the blankets in tight, and she sat with him.

“Good night, little Will,” she said. “I love you.”

“Good night, Isa.”

And she sat for a half hour, rubbing his back to sooth him. Each time her hand moved back and forth, she felt as if she was waving goodbye.

Earlier that day Isabella felt naked rushing through the crowds with nothing in her hands. That night, she felt as if she were swallowed whole by all the things she carried and the darkness around her. The city was never as empty as it was at night. The crime rate within the city was low, so most of the guards stayed around the capital’s perimeter at night. It seemed as if all the city was always afraid that the creatures from the north would return at any moment.

Nonetheless, Isabella stayed in the alleyways and watched carefully for anyone who might approach. No one did, and soon she was at the Royal Court. She remembered walking in

and out of the building, an elegant dress making her royalty all too evident. Now she wore simple black clothing, as if trying to fade into the black night. None of the streets were lit.

She didn't see Blake, so she began to circle the building. The magnificent architecture of the building was only second to that of the Royal Manor.

As she neared the back of the large building, she stopped in her tracks, and suddenly the flames she saw in her mind ignited against the night. She and Liam had decided to spend their time outside the city that day, so they were headed toward the southern gardens. But their journey to the greenery turned red and orange as the creatures set the city on fire. It happened so quickly wherever they appeared, as if the fire was coming off of their bodies.

"There you are," came Blake's voice. Isabella looked at him for a moment before turning back to the scene before her. "What is it?" he asked.

"This is where they took Liam. He ran forward to try to protect me from them."

Blake winced, he felt guilty for bringing her near the spot, even though he had no idea what had happened there. So he pulled her and began to hurry to the tunnel, sputtering lies at her, "Come on, Isabella. A guard is coming."

She believed him, and before she knew it, they had faded behind the false brick backing of one of the Royal Court's walls. It was even darker inside than it was in William's room where the sliver of moonlight had failed to make an impact. No light trickled in from the edges of the false brick.

"How are we supposed to see through this tunnel?" Isabella asked. Her voice echoed off the walls.

"I was here earlier. I left some lanterns downstairs," he said.

"Why didn't you leave them here, where we need them?"

"Because if a guard checked the passage, they would have immediately known someone had been here," he said. "You need to think your questions through before you ask them."

Isabella glared at him, irritated, and he saw. The light from the lanterns had just brightened the thin, dirt hallway. As they got closer, Isabella saw the room. There was a table, a bit of food, and a few chairs. On one of the chairs was a guard's uniform.

"Someone works here, Blake."

"Not tonight." She waited for an explanation, but she didn't feel the need to ask for one. He always had some sort of answer prepared. At the table, he took a bite of the bread on the table before folding the guard uniform – chain mail dressed in scarlet red – and putting it into his pack. The uniform was heavy and bulky, which made Isabella curious what else he had packed. But she was distracted from asking when he handed her a set of clothes that had been beneath the uniform. "This is your disguise."

It was the white garb of a medic with a scarlet hood hanging off of it. Women were generally only let outside of the country with their family, so it was suspicious for Isabella to be with Blake, who would seem like a soldier, when she was alone. However the few female medics that the country had often traveled with soldiers.

"So I have to play the part of the medic," Isabella said.

"It should be easy for you. Wasn't your mother a medic at one point?"

"A very, very long time ago. And for a very short time. She taught me some of what she knew though."

Isabella's mother grew up in a poorer family, and being a medic was the best way to change her fate. But she met Isabella's father, a soldier, shortly after starting. And Elisa was not one for war – it left her unsteady. So she stopped as soon as Isabella's father promised to care for

her. His family was much more fortunate. It was hard for Isabella to imagine her mother in her youth, determined yet of low status. Now she had every comfort. And so Isabella never saw the fight her mother had for herself.

“Wouldn’t it be smarter for us to change now?” she asked. “There have to be other guards down here.”

“You would think that,” he said. “But there shouldn’t be anyone in the tunnels until the very end. The guards are more concerned about the other side.”

“How many are there?”

“That’s one question I don’t have the answer to,” he said. “Let’s start moving. Someone will be here to start their shift sooner or later.”

He grabbed a lantern from the table and began walking. She did the same, anxious about what awaited them at the end of the tunnel. She was less concerned about how many guards there would be than at what she imagined Blake might do to them so that they could pass.

Chapter 4

Blake fell back into the dirt wall of the tunnel. He looked up at the sword pointed at his throat, smiling. Isabella had finally succeeded in disarming him and knocking him back. Her prior experience with a sword helped, but her fast learning continued to surprise him.

Determination must have made the blade easier for her to wield.

"If you improve that quickly, this mission will be a lot easier than I expected," he said.

"Let's hope," she said. "Let's stop sparing and eat now. I'm starving."

They had been in the tunnels for almost two days, and Isabella hated not knowing how much longer they had to go. She slid her sword into its scabbard and looked through her back for some food. Pulling out a chunk of bread, she sat down to eat, satisfied.

Blake pushed himself off the ground and walked to where his sword had dropped to the ground. He had succeeded in avoiding Isabella's attacks for a while even without his sword, which is something she still had to work on. But he found nothing where he thought he had dropped the sword.

"You disarmed me over here, right?"

She barely turned to look. "Yes. I'm still surprised you lasted that long after that."

"Isabella, my sword isn't here."

Then she actually turned. Unlike Blake, she saw the sword. It just wasn't on the ground.

"Behind you!"

Blake turned, immediately jumping back after seeing the creature gripping his sword tightly. He dodged a swing of the blade, and another, before grabbing the creature's wrist so he could wrestle for the sword.

Sliding her sword back out of its sheath, Isabella rushed toward them to attack while the creature was defenseless. But it wasn't.

It dropped the sword, so Blake lessened his grip, his focus moving to the blade. The creature sidestepped and pulled his hand back. Isabella was close when the creature pushed his hand forward, sending a mass of flame forward with the motion. She dived to the ground, barely avoiding the singe of the flame. It flew over their packs, luckily not burning their supplies to a crisp, and it dissipated when it crashed into the dirt wall.

Isabella saw fire starting to appear in the creature's hands, gathering energy, as it prepared to attack her again, but the small flame faded as soon as Blake swung his sword at the creature's arms. Blake's blade should have sliced through the creature's skin, but instead it nearly bounced back. It barely left a mark at all.

The creature's skin looked like a collection of miniscule scales, almost giving off the appearance of black chainmail. The face looked empty. Small eyes, entirely black, were the only features Isabella could find as she forced herself to stand back up. Blake was hacking his sword at the creature. It had an effect, but it was a small one. They were lucky that the creature was not using the fire again.

And then it hit her. The black body. The empty face. The fire. This was one of the creatures that had attacked the capital, taking away so many people she held dear.

She sprinted, blade in hand, and thrust the sword into the creature's chest. It did not go deep, but it pained the creature more than Blake's attacks had. It quickly turned its attention to her instead. It hit her hard in the face with a fist, knocking her back and to the ground. She had a firm grip on her sword, so it moved with her, curving slightly in the creature's body before falling with Isabella.

It was creating fire in its hands again, but the creature's apparent lack of awareness left it focused on Isabella and ignoring Blake. This failure left it open for Blake's attack. Both hands gripping the hilt of his sword high above his head, he swung down to pierce the neck of their attacker. Still moving faster than the creature, Blake pulled the sword out before swinging it across the wound. It was only at this point that Isabella noticed the thick, black blood coming out of the creature's wounds. The blood was barely visible against the dark, scaled skin.

The blood flowed more quickly out of the neck wound, and this attack was finally enough to scare the creature off. It let out a sharp growl, its voice somehow so deep and ragged that it was piercing to Isabella and Blake's ears. Then it bent down, running off on all fours like an animal fleeing its predator.

"We can't let it get away," Isabella said, forcing herself back up off the ground.

"You're right. If we stay behind it, we can use it as a distraction for the guards at the exit," Blake said, excited and fast as he gathered his possessions. "Let's go!"

Isabella watched him, surprised that he only wanted to follow it, but even more surprised at herself that her initial intention was to kill it. He hurried off, telling her to hurry, so she ignored her thoughts and gathered her things. And they were moving.

They ran, kicking the dirt behind them. Their lanterns swung aggressively with their motion. But they only needed them for a short time, for they heard the shouts of the guard. The creature reached them; Isabella and Blake were not far behind. The sound of the shouts and a piercing growl from the creature forced the pair to crash to a halt.

"We can't let them notice us," Blake said. "And they will see that it's wounded, so they'll look in the tunnels for who attacked it. We don't have much time."

Moving carefully, they reached the mouth of the tunnel. It opened up into a room much larger than that of the capital side. It needed to fit the six guards that the pair saw attacking the creature. It had revealed its power to them already, for fire flickered over all of the wooden furnishings, the fire's light cascading against the dirt walls. How could it have control over fire? It had to have some sort of weapon hidden in its scaled skin. These creatures may be real, but magic could not be.

The guards continued to attack the creature, forcing it into the corner opposite of the exit. The space was open for the pair to move.

"Our only choice is to run," Isabella whispered to Blake, both of them still unseen by the guards.

He nodded, and they both took off.

It took until they reached the exit for one of the guards to shout, "Someone stop them!"

They ran up the curving stairs, hearing the metal of clanking armor behind them mixed in with the sounds of pain erupting from the creature. Blake pushed open the wooden door in the ceiling at the top of the stairs. He motioned for Isabella to climb out before him, as one of the guardsmen charged up after them. Blake waited for him, unseen, and knocking the man out with the hilt of his sword. Only one seemed to have chased after them, so Blake climbed out of the door after Isabella.

Back outside, Isabella took in a deep breath. The musty, dirty air from the tunnel made this air seem infinitely fresh. She pulled Blake up, when he was ready, and they started running off. The exit to the tunnel was hidden in a patch of trees, but as soon as the two left those trees, the environment transitioned into an open prairie with the road off in the distance. There was nowhere to hide.

"Where are we supposed to change into our disguises? We're going to run into someone this way," Isabella said. "And if we don't, the guards will be after us and we'll have nowhere to hide."

"For now, let's just run fast."

And they did for a short time, but when they turned back and saw flames sprouting from the patch of trees, they were no longer concerned about being chased. The creature had somehow causes enough trouble to distract the rest of the guards. But Isabella had enough faith in the guards to trust that the creature would not get much farther before they put it down. With this reassurance in mind, Isabella and Blake slowed.

"This changes things, doesn't it?" Blake asked as he panted to regain his breath.

Isabella looked at him, his face tense. "No, it doesn't," she said.

The sweat on his face dripped into a small cut; she did not realize the creature had gotten any attacks in with the sword. The creatures' ability to create fire made them more worrisome, sure, but it also made the blame so much clearer. Her loved ones had been taken in flames, and these creatures had the ability to use fire from thin air. This only made her want to fight back that much more. His tense expression shifted slightly, and she knew he understood what she was thinking.

"What do you think they call themselves?" he asked. "They're certainly not human."

"Far from it," she said. "For a while, we just called them the rogues from the north."

"Rogues," he muttered.

He looked forward to see a town coming up in the distance. The prairie landscape was over; there would be a place for them to hide. A place for them to rest.

"We should stop for the night before going into that village," Isabella said. "We look a little bit too ragged to enter a town now."

"We'd look a little suspicious," he agreed. "And we'll need to change."

Isabella nodded vigorously. "We're lucky the guards didn't see me."

Blake laughed. "Let's stop over there." He pointed to a large group of trees resting against a pond. It was not the most concealed place, but it would be comfortable for the night.

They set up camp, making sure to change into their disguises immediately. They stood separately, behind trees of their own so the other could not see. Then, dressed in the new garb of a soldier and a medic, they settled and had the meal Isabella had called for back in the tunnel. The spot was quiet besides the gentle movement of the river, and it was dark besides the fire between them and the still-lit village not far off.

"How close are we to Ails?" Isabella asked.

"That's the last village that stands between us and leaving the country," Blake replied.

By the next day, they had already bypassed the village, spending much of their time along the way training. Rather than taking the risk of anyone recognizing Isabella, the pair decided to avoid others until finally leaving West Whilsan. They had entered Ails and were nearing the country's town closest to the border.

Relations flourished between West Whilsan and Ails as of late, so the townspeople were not disturbed when a soldier and medic from West Whilsan walked into the town. If anyone stared, it was likely because of Isabella's Ocelenan skin. Ails annexed Ocelena a few years ago – it had to be strange to see someone who even remotely resembled an Ocelenan walking outside the annexed territory's harsh-kept border.

But Isabella walked alongside Blake, a man who fit in perfectly in Ails. No one would question her place when she was next to him. In the back of her mind, this disturbed her, but she just kept telling herself that they would leave Ails before long. They walked amongst the people, looking for a place to stop at for a meal. Having been there before, Blake led the way. Isabella had not bothered to ask what had brought him to the town in the past.

"There's a tavern not too far from here. It's never too crowded," Blake said, moving confidently through the quiet town.

"It doesn't look like any place here is all that crowded," Isabella said.

"Most of Ails' population is in the cities and castles further south. This town is just a glorified outpost."

"I can see that."

Isabella could not help but stare at the groups of soldiers in their golden-yellow armor moving among the people. It almost looked like the town was evenly split between citizens and military. The idea made Isabella uncomfortable. She spent enough time under guard as a member of the royal family, but even then, she generally only saw the same few guards each day. She could not imagine always being around this many soldiers.

"There's the tavern!" Blake said, picking up his pace as he moved toward a large wooden building.

It reminded Isabella of the tavern she had run through when trying to escape Narek days before. But as soon as the pair stepped inside, she realized just how different Ails was. The inside was much more lavish than any common building in West Whilsan was. Art hung from the walls and chandeliers hung from the ceiling. This tavern, a common place for the town's people, matched the most high class businesses in West Whilsan's capital.

"I take it you've never been anywhere in Ails?" Blake said.

"I have. Just not for many, many years," Isabella said, a bit in awe. "Why is it like this on the inside? The outside looks like any other West Whilsan village."

"It's a border town. It's changed allegiance so many times over the years," Blake said.

"The architecture and design will probably always be haphazard."

He motioned for Isabella to sit at a table in the back, and he went up to the bar to get food and drinks. She looked around, seeing small groups of people dispersed throughout. Many of the groups were exclusively soldiers. Most of the soldiers did not have any food; it seemed this was just where they spent their time off patrol.

Isabella noticed Blake walking back to her, carrying two plates with meat and bread, along with two cups. When he reached to the table, she questioned him before he could even put the food down.

"How do you know so much of other nations? You came up with the plan to move north so quickly, and no matter where we go, you know what to expect."

"As you know, Liam and I are old friends," he said. "It isn't quite commonplace to be friends with a prince."

"So how did you know him?" she asked, beginning to eat from one of the plates Blake had brought, filled with bread.

Blake took a sip from his cup, a drink that Isabella assumed was ale – though her cup was filled with water. She stared at him impatiently, though he avoided eye contact. Instead, he looked toward the food. He picked out a piece of meat and a piece of bread, both of which he gradually ate throughout his story.

"My family used to be in a much better place," he said. "When Whilsan was whole, my father was one of King Faren's closest advisers. I lived in the king's castle so that my father would always be near when he was needed. Liam's family didn't live too far off. As you know, his father was one of the military leaders, and his unit's main role was defending capital."

"I had been in that castle before. We never met?"

"Nothing that I remember. But we were young."

Isabella thought of how King Faren's rule fell apart, how he had arranged the delivery of messages to the rogues that led a militaristic takeover of the northern country. The same rogues that eventually destroyed Isabella's life. After word spread, Faren's rule faltered fast. Isabella's father Aaron maintained the need to liberate the people in the north, and he gained numerous supporters even before Faren had fallen from power. Liam's father Leon in the east argued that maintaining internal fairs was more important.

People revolted, killing Faren and his family, ousting his court. Aaron and Leon both took a stand against the revolts, immediately restoring peace. But the people were split on their policies, and revolts continued as the two military leaders attempted to retain peace. Soon after, they realized the need to split the country in half, as the people were split on how to proceed with the nation's policies. So Aaron ruled the West, and Leon ruled the East. They remained closely related countries, close but tense allies. With their separate rules intact, none of Faren's family or court were seen again.

Isabella could not help but think of how Blake's father likely knew of Faren's plans to aid the rogues to the north. He could have been involved.

"Your father..." Isabella began. "Did he know of Faren's corruption?"

Blake looked down, shaking his head. She immediately knew that this was a question that had corrupted his life whenever he revealed his past.

"My father had no idea," he said. "But everyone assumed he was involved, so we were ousted along with Faren's family. My parents tried to right Faren's wrongs. That's how I know this land so well. They took me all around as we tried to help those hurt by his misdeeds. Later on, it just became an opposition toward the rogues."

"Did you know about them? Their fire?" Isabella asked, unable to remove her focus from the creatures.

He nodded. "I've fought them many times before."

No wonder he knew so much about the land, the rogues, and the way to save Liam. His entire life had been traveling and fighting. This was what he did.

"Where are your parents now?" she asked.

"They died fighting the rogues."

She would have continued asking him questions, glad to learn more about him and surprised he was so open about it, despite how troubling much of his past was. But her eyes were glued to the door of the tavern. People had gradually entered throughout their conversation, the tavern getting more and more crowded. None of them bothered her, yet she tensed at the newest patron: Narek. He entered the tavern dressed in soldier's garb, clothes similar to what Blake wore, just of higher rank. A soldier stood with him at either side.

"Blake, we have to go," Isabella whispered harshly.

He turned to the direction she faced, and turned back to look at her just as quickly.

"Stay calm. They'll have to go up to the bar, and we can move out as soon as their backs are to the door," he said. "Put what leftover food you can in your bag."

They each began to collect the food that they could without seeming too anxious. It wasn't atypical to purchase extra food and to leave with some, but people usually spent much more time eating and relaxing at taverns than Blake and Isabella had. Storing the food was difficult for them to do without feeling as if all eyes were on them.

"What is he doing here?" Blake asked.

"He's been traveling here on business for a few weeks now. I don't know much of it," Isabella said, closing her bag and standing.

Narek's back was to the door.

Blake swung his bag over his shoulders and led the way out of the tavern. Although they had been nervous, no one looked at them with any grain of suspicion. They neared the door without problems, but Isabella stopped when she heard Narek speak – she was glad his words were not for her, but the words shocked her nonetheless.

"So you agree, then? This territory would be in much better hands under the command of my father," Narek said.

Isabella turned just enough to see him; he sat comfortably at the bar next to an Ails general. While he wore the typical golden brown and grey armor of Ails soldiers, the man had a general's helmet sitting on the bar counter. Most soldiers had simple metal helmets, and the general's was golden and ornamented with wing-like extensions.

"Come on, Isabella!" Blake ushered her on.

She followed, though she desperately wanted to hear more of the conversation. As Blake and she rushed away from the tavern, her mind whirled with Narek's words.

"He wants to take land from Ails?" she said, trying to sort through the information.

"That is not your concern now, Isabella," Blake said. "Let's get out of town."

The tavern was not too deep into the small town, so at their heightened pace, it did not take long to near the edge. Blake maintained a casual appearance despite their haste. Isabella struggled, more overwhelmed with the information than focused. Narek's plans to obtain territory from Ails meant his family's rule was removing emphasis from dealing with the rogues. West Whilsan had been pushing through the disputed territory in the north for years. That movement could not be stopped.

"Stop!" came a deep-voiced shout.

Blake halted immediately, holding his arm out in front of Isabella so she would snap out of her disarray and stop moving as well.

"What is it, sir?" Blake asked.

The man came closer, and Isabella realized it was a soldier. His helmet was just metal. At least he was not a general. They had been so close. They were so close to the edge that no person besides the three of them could be seen.

"I knew it! You're the man who took West Whilsan's princess."

The soldier drew his sword and changed his pace from a decisive march to a challenging charge. Blake lunged forward, his own sword in hand. Their blades met suddenly and with equal strength. Deadlocked.

Isabella turned to make sure no one else could see them, and she saw no one. But she did see a page hanging against the wall of the building near them. She checked to see that Blake was already overtaking the soldier before running at the wall.

The page had crude drawings of the two of them. It claimed Blake was a wanted fugitive, and he kidnapped Isabella. Word had already spread out of West Whilsan. They knew Isabella

was missing, and somehow they knew she was with Blake. Their context could not have been less accurate, but she was shocked that they had learned of Blake so easily.

Hoping to avoid problematic run-ins later on, she tore the page off the wall and stuffed it into her bag. Then she turned to face Blake, forcing her to stop in her tracks once more.

"You killed him!" She gasped, amazed at herself for restraining her voice's volume despite her surprise.

"We have to go!" Blake said, ignoring her surprise and running off.

She stared at the body, bloody and battered. It had happened so quickly.

Blake skidded to a stop when he realized Isabella had yet to move. He ran closer to her, ushered her to move. "Hurry!" he said, a quiet shout.

She shook off her shock and ran with him. If she did not move, someone would catch her, take her home, and ruin her mission. Blake's morals were a problem she had to deal with later.

In moments, they were rushing through trees and ducking under branches. Isabella attempted to mimic Blake's movements as the brush thickened, welcoming them into the deeper parts of the forest. She felt her hair catch twigs and bark scrape her skin. It was rare that she ever traveled so far out of society, and she was only in the thick brush of a forest. She did not realize that the reaches of Crescent Forest dug so deep into Ails; in fact, she had not expected the forest to start for several miles west.

But Blake knew exactly where it would be. As always, he had every minute planned from the start. In every instance where something went wrong and the pair had to take off, he knew which direction to run in. Isabella knew this is what he had based his life on, what he had always worked for. Whether or not she trusted him or his morals, he would proceed. She doubted he would stop even if she left him to move on alone.

Then the trees seemed to vanish, and Blake suddenly stopped moving. Isabella barely followed his lead and stopped before falling into the water of the river before them.

"Careful, Isabella," he said.

Despite the run, he regained his breath and calmness in an instant. And Isabella knew why when she regained her footing. Before them, perfectly planned as usual, was a raft in the water tied to two of the many trees.

"How long has this raft been sitting here waiting for you?" Isabella asked.

"A while. I'm surprised it's still here."

He did not sound surprised. He motioned for Isabella to walk on it. She did, and as soon as it was within reach, she held onto the log sticking up vertically in the center.

"I added that just for you," he said.

She let it go just as fast as she had grabbed it, and he laughed. He followed her on. His feet looked much more stable on the wooden raft, and his arms were even steadier when they used a knife to slice through the ropes holding the raft in place. Once again, Isabella was the imbalanced one as the raft thrust forward. It moved at a consistent speed, carried by the current of the always moving river.

"This is a lot faster than I expected," she said, grabbing the central log again.

"Have you never been on a raft before?"

"Royal families usually take boats instead."

He laughed at her again. She gave him a stern look, amazed that he could transform from calm, to murder, to escape, to calm all in an hour. He was an unusual person, at least compared to the townspeople she was so familiar with back in West Whilsan.

"How do you do it?" she asked.

No longer was she as concerned with his moral implications as she was curious of his stable sanity – if she could call it that.

“Do what? All of this?” he asked, and she nodded. She hoped by “all of this” he knew she meant the journey as well as the killing. He continued with an answer: “It’s been my life, like I’ve told you. Ever since Faren fell, nothing has really been constant. So I’ve learned to be that stable piece. The log on the raft that you can hold onto when you’re about to fall.”

“And that includes not flinching at murder? You didn’t even pause, even hesitate for a second.”

“If that soldier had let anyone know we were in the town, then that would have been like falling off this raft.”

“So you’ll do anything to stay afloat?”

“Almost.”

Chapter 5

The raft whisked them out of Ails, and drove them deep into the center of the Crescent Forest. Though the river was not thin, the pine trees lining its edges stood like walls. Isabella had never felt more enclosed outdoors.

When the space began to open up, Blake began to prepare to stop the raft. The trees suddenly dispersed into a clearing, and Isabella saw a tiny wooden cottage sitting in the middle of it. She doubted it was even the size of her bedroom back in the Royal Manor, but then again, her bedroom was much larger than the typical room.

Outside the cottage was a little table with logs surrounding it. Isabella wondered if that table served as the dining room. The cottage did not look big enough to house one inside. Isabella did not notice Blake moving to stop the raft until they had come to a complete stop. He moved off of the raft and started to walk toward the small building. If this is the place he called home during the past several years, Isabella underestimated how entirely different their lives were. Even though she already thought they could not be more different.

He turned to face her when he noticed she was still on the raft. "Are you coming?" he asked.

Isabella nodded and quickly followed after him, not wanting him to question what she was thinking about. "Is this your home?" she asked.

"It's my grandmother's," he said. "Was my grandmother's. I've been using it as a place to stay in the forest since she died."

She followed him as he opened the door – the door without a lock, something that shocked her even more than the size. She had never spent a moment of her life where she did not

feel secure; just the idea of an unlocked cottage in the middle of the woods made her uncomfortable.

“So you’re grandmother lived in the middle of the forest? All alone?” she asked.

“She was comfortable here.”

The cottage was as small as Isabella imagined it. And there was no dining room after all. Instead, it was composed of a miniscule kitchen, an unenclosed bedroom, and a bit of extra space for what Blake would probably call the living room. But it was all one open and tight space. The only part of the cottage that could not be seen from the entrance was a small space blocked off for bathing.

Isabella wanted to question his word choice: comfortable? This was temporary, if anything. And even as a temporary home, it was not comfortable. But, maybe, as a lone woman – an old, alone woman – any more space would have been difficult.

“She was in love with a nature. I don’t think living anywhere else would have made her happier. Even if things could have been easier for her,” Blake said, as if he could translate the expressions on her face with perfect efficiency.

“I’m surprised no one has stayed here, since you only stay here when you’re in the forest.”

“Crescent Forest isn’t a very common destination. The deeper you go, the less it’s traveled.” He walked to the kitchenette, looking through the shelves as if refamiliarizing himself with the space. It must have been a while since he last stayed in the forest. “This place, being in the center of the forest, is pretty much untouched. We’ve been lucky that the animals tend to stay out of the clearing for whatever reason. I think there’s more to this place than my grandmother ever said.”

"What do you mean?" Isabella walked over to sit in one of the chairs in the living room, but was distracted by a shelf filled with assorted volumes of books. She began to leaf through the titles.

"Like the rogues can summon fire. My grandmother was never harmed in all her years here. You're right. It's surprising no one else has ever come here."

Blake continued taking in the supplies he had left in the cottage, and Isabella continued looking through the books. He mentioned how he had the place to himself for about three years, which meant both his grandmother and parents had died then or sometime before. His parents had died fighting the rogues before they had stepped foot in Isabella's city. She almost felt indebted to them. Maybe they had prevented the creatures from attacking years earlier. Blake's family could have given her more time to spend with her own. And yet her family had the chance of being reunited, and Blake's family had fallen apart for all its good deeds. Maybe Isabella could forgive Blake's killings. He had his reasons.

Then Isabella's fingers found an untitled volume. Peeking her curiosity, it was leather bound and the only book on the shelf without entirely yellowed pages. She pulled it out, finding it lighter in her hands than she expected. Inside the book was sketch after sketch, each more beautiful and well-crafted than the one before. The elegance of each piece dwarfed the precision of the map Blake had drawn of the region. But unlike that map, the ink on these creations was dry. And though the pages were not yellowed, they were far from white. He had been away from his drawings for some time.

"This is what you really enjoy, isn't it? More than the killings and the journeys," Isabella said. She looked over at Blake, who was bent over a chest that he must have dragged out from under the bed.

He whipped around, and his face blew up with surprise when he saw the sketchbook in her hands. Before saying a word, he went to take the book from her hands, but she held it back. Hoping it would help him calm down, and maybe get her an answer, she instead replaced the sketchbook among the volumes.

"It's nothing you should feel the need to hide," she said.

She remembered the carving of her name on her headboard. That was the similarity between Blake and Liam. They were each craftsmen in their own ways. Liam made art from wood, Blake made art with ink on paper.

"It's unimportant. I should never have wasted so much time on them," he said, looking longingly at the book, thin and barely visible on the shelf. But his eyes knew exactly where to find it. "This journey that we're on now is what is important. It's what my parents would have wanted me to do. A way to honor them."

Isabella felt dwarfed by his passion for the art and his family. She was on the journey for the same reasons as him. She wanted to honor her family, the brother and father and lover that she lost. But she questioned if she would have been honorable enough to go on the journey if she did not have a chance of returning with Liam alive. And she did not know what her sketchbook was. She spent time in the Capital Bell Tower because she loved its sound and its stone. But she never slipped into her potential passions. She never had a sketchbook to carry at her side or to store on her shelf. Instead, she was a princess and her passion had been her family's throne.

"Maybe when this is all over, you can return to those sketches. Do something with them," she said.

"If this ever ends," he said, sighing deeply in the silence. "Then I'll think about it. But now, it is unimportant."

As if the conversation never happened, he continued to look through the chest by the bed. Isabella knew their discussion had come to a close, so she walked over to learn what was drawing his attention so deeply. To see the chest, filled to the brim with weapons, did not surprise her in the least. She assumed this was his, maybe his parents', but she doubted his grandmother had knowingly kept this collection of weapons beneath where she slept.

The only time Isabella had seen that many weapons was when she entered the West Whilsan armory, and she had only stepped foot into that building once. After the first raid, when she lost her father, she began to take fighting much more seriously. That was when she first held the sword she carried at her side. But before taking a sword in her hand, she had held another weapon, one that she saw peeking out from beneath the swords, spears, and axes. She saw a set of arrows sticking out of a quiver, and knew that somewhere else in the chest, there had to be a bow.

Blake took a few weapons out, stacking them on the floor, so he could get a better look at what was inside. He had carried a sword since she met him, so she was not sure what else he was looking for. With the journey that stood before them, maybe a second weapon wasn't a bad idea. In a moment, Blake seemed to settle on a spear – it looked so thin, so fragile looking compared to the other weapons despite the sharp metal tip – and a second sword, longer than the first. Neither would be difficult to carry in addition to the sword he already kept at his side.

Rather than asking if she wanted anything from the chest, he seemed to have sensed her stare. She must have been more focused on the arrows than she realized. He gestured for her to reach inside the box of wicked tools.

Inwardly, she felt a need to justify taking a weapon. As if it was wrong to be drawn to it. But she knew Blake did not care, he did not object. So she was surprised to hear herself speak as she reached for the quiver of arrows.

“Archery has always been a sport of sorts in my family,” she said.

“The bow should be somewhere at the bottom,” Blake said. “My mother used it, so it will be a good size for you.”

As she searched for the bow, she lifted various weapons – axes and clubs and ones she could not name – and set them on the floor. Each felt heavier than the next. She imagined weight being a property in itself, sinking from weapon to weapon so the ones at the bottom of the chest had soaked up the heaviness most. The bow would be impossible to lift, all the way at the bottom.

But it wasn't all the way at the bottom. It rested comfortably on top of a shield and what looked to be a set of various armor pieces. And it wasn't impossible to lift. It could not have felt lighter – righter – in her hands.

“So you can shoot well?” Blake said, and she nodded. “That will be useful.”

He picked a long dagger out of the chest and handed it to her.

“Just in case,” he said.

They both took out sheathes for the blades, and Isabella put on the bow's brown leather quiver. Blake replaced the unchosen weapons in the chest, grabbed his spear, and began walking toward the door. She hadn't noticed him swing his bag over his shoulders.

“We just got here,” Isabella said.

“We're not leaving. We just need something to eat,” Blake said. He stood in front of the door, waiting for her to follow.

"I have food in my bag."

"Not enough. And why waste that food when we can get more while we're in the forest?"

He wanted to hunt. Isabella had never hunted. Archery had been a sport in her family, but nothing more. She never had to hunt or kill or harm at all. Each time she held a bow in her hand and strung an arrow, it had been directed at a tree, a target her father had set for her. He would have her sit waiting as he hung and carefully placed logs around the garden, circles carved into each one. It would take him half an hour, sometimes less and sometimes more, before he was content with the random arrangement of the targets. Then he would tell her it was time. Each of them would string their bows and race to see who could hit all the targets first. Before his arrows, marked by their fletching painted red, could sink into half of the logs, her arrows, fletching painted white, would have honed into every last target. Never was her father more proud of her than when she bested him so greatly.

For a while, she thought her father had let her win each time. When she told her mother this, Elisa let her know that archery was one of the things Aaron had wanted to master. He never could. But seeing his daughter capture every target made him feel as if he had.

In all that time, she never thought of the bow and arrow as a weapon. She couldn't decide if her opposition was toward the idea of killing, or that the killing would taint the innocent idea of those memories.

"Have you never hunted?" Blake asked, as usual sensing her thoughts as if they were as potent as the smell of wood in the cabin. "Archery is a sport for your family, but you've never hunted?"

"Archery does not have to be about killing," she said.

Blake sighed, but he opened the door and walked out anyway. She knew he still expected her to follow, as he said, "If you think I'm half as accurate with this spear as you are with that bow, then you've got a poor judge of character. Let's not go hungry tonight."

And she followed, because she knew that an animal would die whether it was from his spear or her arrows. If she shot the killing blow, maybe she could make it a faster death.

Chapter 6

But her attempt failed. She aimed her arrow carefully at the deer's neck. It wasn't enough. She still saw life in its eye as it fought for the energy to run. Her hand quivered too much to hold another arrow. She started the end of a life, but was unable to finish it.

It was not her, but Blake who dealt the last blow. And he was only preventing its escape. She had not killed, but she had drawn blood. Her weapon had pierced skin.

Archery was no longer a sport.

It was a small war.

Blake alone dragged the body back to the cottage, for Isabella could not convince herself to help him.

Blake alone gathered the wood for the fire. But Isabella knew she could not sit and act as if Blake was doing this all himself. She had shot the first blow – a wound she could still clearly see on the animal's wounded and dead neck. So Isabella started the fire while Blake was in the forest, gathering extra wood for when night fell.

When he returned, she was desperately staring at the animal, a knife in her hand. She felt a sort of duty to prepare it herself, as if she had no choice but to dive headfirst into this bloody responsibility.

She did not notice him until his hand wrapped around hers and he pried the knife from her fingers. His hands were soft and gentle in the places where scars hadn't left the skin dry. The inconsistency of his skin brought her back.

"You don't have to do this," he said. "Go inside. I'll tell you when it's done."

There was something different about her shooting the arrow at the deer and stabbing the creature in the tunnels. There was a line of innocence and guilt that she knew her weapons could not cross.

It was not because the creature had likely lived – or rather, if it died, it was not directly her fault – that absolved her of guilt. It was not because the deer had died because she saw it and shot it first – making Blake aware enough to finish its life – that demolished her innocence.

It was because the creature was guilty that she felt innocent, and because the deer was innocent that she felt guilty.

“Come back out,” Blake said softly, sticking his head through the door and into the cabin.

She was walking outside before she had made the conscious decision. As she neared the fire, the smell of their kill wafted toward her. Her stomach had already tied itself into knots, but it tightened into a strangling feeling when she realized the air smelled *good*. Their kill smelled *good*. Never had she felt sicker in her life.

As if for the victim, she ate. She forced herself to let the lean meat slide down her throat. She forced herself to keep it down though it desperately swam upward, a child trying not to drown. Yet she let it drown, she smothered it. She killed the deer again. But this time she did it because it was already dead, and she did not want its death to be for nothing. If it fed them for a few days, somehow it would not hurt her as much. At least this is what she hoped.

Blake took care of storing the leftover meat, of which there was plenty. Isabella sat on a chair in the cabin as he went about his work. She imagined ways to pretend that their meals for the next few days were from something other than this creature they killed. It was a feast on the

night of the Queen's Ball. It was the first meal she and Liam after they had wedded – though she still questioned if this would ever happen. It was the last meal she had shared with her father.

No matter how much time she spent trying to redraw their actions in her mind, she returned to the knowledge that they killed. They killed together, and she could not forget it until all of what was left was gone.

She had fallen asleep in the chair as her mind had failed its every attempt. It was the sound of men yelling and weapons clinking as men marched that awoke her. Either Blake had never gone to sleep or it had awoken him minutes before. He stood in front of the window, staring outside with a look of blended fear and planning.

Until that point, fear seemed to avoid Blake, as if he could somehow do away with the emotion, make it nonexistent. She walked over to the window next to him and looked where his eyes looked, and she felt what he felt. Outside, Narek stood triumphantly in front of at least fifteen soldiers. He had found her.

"How" was all Isabella could say. Blake shook his head.

Narek and his soldiers lined up at the edge of the forest. They had just stopped moving, rather than walking deeper into the clearing, closer to the cabin. All of them had their weapons drawn, and some even held them above their waists, as if ready to strike. Only a few of them carried torches, but the light they emitted was enough for Isabella to see Narek's smug satisfaction as he found her face in the window.

"Why aren't they coming closer?" Isabella asked.

"Remember when I said my grandmother had never been harmed in all her years here? It's because the clearing," Blake said. "There's something to it. I don't know what."

"So you're saying if we just stay here, they can't do anything to us?"

"Come on out, princess! Your future is waiting for you," Narek shouted, a blast of noise interrupting their conversation as the soldiers cheered with him.

"I'm saying that is a possibility," Blake said. "But we can't stay here forever. Do you think they'll ever disperse?"

"They'll need food at some point, won't they?"

"There's enough of them to send a couple of men off for that while the others wait."

Isabella looked back outside. There were certainly more than fifteen men. From what she could see, it looked more like twenty. But the torches barely brought any light, so she knew there were likely several men hidden in the dark of the forest. This time when she looked though, not all of them had their weapons drawn. Some of them had returned their blades to their sheathes, as if they were beginning to realize they could do nothing more than wait. She also noticed that the flickering light of the torches gleamed off the golden-yellow armor a few of the men wore – Narek had some men from Ails alongside him.

"You belong in much better than a dusty old cabin," Narek yelled. "Let's take you back where you belong."

The soldiers could do nothing more than wait, but Narek would continue to taunt her into recklessness and anger.

"We should leave soon," Blake said. "If we waste more of our supplies, we'll be crippled at least until we get out of the forest."

"How are we supposed to outrun all of them? How are we supposed to outrun a horse?"

Blake looked outside once more – he had not seen Narek’s horse at first. When he faced her, he looked overwhelmed, unsure how to proceed. Isabella knew he must have been in more dangerous situations than this before. And he had, but all he could think was, *I need to keep her safe*. Before, he had been alone. The only person who he had to protect was himself.

“We just need a plan,” Blake said, though he did not have one.

Isabella’s mind began to spin, and she paced as if the step-by-step movement would somehow summon an idea. There were at least fifteen men, and there was little hope the pair could outrun them. With that many, they would have no problem surrounding the pair, no matter how much of a head start they got. Not to mention, Narek would undoubtedly catch them when on his horse. But the fifteen men would never be able to catch up with the horse.

“Do you think you can get Narek’s horse if I distract them?” Isabella asked.

“How are you going to distract all of them at once?”

“Fire.”

Blake nodded, as if he understood immediately. They both looked outside the window, and Isabella’s eye moved from torch to torch in the enemies’ hands.

“You think you can actually shoot through all of those?”

Isabella nodded, sure as the small fires were still raging.

Within moments, Isabella had her bow drawn, arrows ready to fire. Blake had his sword sheathed at his side, and their things were just in front of the door to grab before their escape.

As soon as Blake opened the cabin’s front door, Narek and his men gained a new level of alertness. All of their attention was magnetized toward him and his sword.

“Come out to play, Blake?” Narek said, spitting out his name. “West Whilsan isn’t too happy with you for taking its princess.”

"The princess isn't too happy with you for going after her."

Isabella looked out the door, still cracked open enough for her to see outside, but too dark inside for Narek and his soldiers to see her waiting. Her hand shook slightly against the bow, strung onto the string. She thought of the fire that the rogues had caused and how it had devastated her.

"She'll understand that this is what's best for her soon enough. What's best for her family and its throne," Narek said.

"If only you understood her intentions."

"Her intentions matter little. Her duty is what matters. Though I know duty is something your family misconstrues."

Could the fire she was about to start devastate the soldiers? Or did it matter, since they had come armed? She was defending herself with fire, not killing with it. She could send the arrows through their necks like the deer, leaving them to die slowly. But she wasn't. Unless the fire burned through them.

"I don't think there is much difference between your family and your perception of mine. Where is the duty in usurping a throne?" Blake said.

"The throne is already mine."

Fire burst behind Narek, framing him and spurring his horse. Before the soldiers could react, fire after fire started as arrows whizzed through the captured flames. They broke free, quickly catching fire in the area surrounding the men. Though they tried to move forward, the boundary of the cabin blocked them, and they stuck through the invisible barrier. Each of the soldiers clamored in panic and disarray, but Narek coached his composure, already after his horse.

With the horse moving farther and farther from Blake, he knew he had no chance at claiming it. He and Isabella ran, carrying their possessions on their backs, as they charged north, away from the cabin and the soldiers. The plan had failed, but one element had worked: the soldiers had been dealt with. Narek was the only concern.

Before he vanished into the forest to search for his horse, he shouted after them, "In only a moment, I'll be on your tail, princess. And my sword will be drawn."

Narek was no longer a pest.

He was a seed of war.

Chapter 7

The forest felt like a labyrinth as Isabella and Blake rushed through it, dodging tree and branch, balancing on uneven ground. Blake knew Crescent Forest. He had traversed it an uncountable number of times, and it had become a place of comfort for him. But it was a place of danger for both of them that night, and no matter how well Blake knew the forest, he could not help but feel as if it had shifted and become a new place.

It had been less than an hour when Isabella swore she heard the faint sound of hooves clapping against the forest floor.

"We knew that would happen sooner or later," she said.

Blake stopped suddenly, taking in the distant sound. "Stay here. I'll ambush him."

Isabella was about to ask what he meant, but she closed her mouth when he began scaling one of the trees nearest to them. She watched him as he scaled the tree, moving surprisingly fast.

"So I'm just going to be the bait then?"

"All we have to do is get him off his horse. Then we'll have the advantage," Blake said, his voice seeming quieter in his distance. The hooves were getting louder, closer. "Stay quiet."

She turned to face the direction in which she heard Narek approaching. Sword at her side, she drew her bow with an arrow at the ready. If she could stop him, Blake had a better chance of knocking him off his mount. Or she could shoot him and accomplish that goal without Blake's help. But she doubted she would be able to make herself do that. She was bluffing. She just had to trust that Narek would not realize soon enough so Blake would have his chance.

And their enemy arrived sooner than they expected. His hair was uncharacteristically disheveled, and his clothes were burnt through in different spots. The worst spot – his arm – left

not just in clothes burnt through, but a red mark glistened on his skin. It was not a bad burn, but it was still a mark. Narek had never looked less like a prince.

"So now the princess is aiming her arrows at me. What a surprise." He laughed, as if the odds were never against him, even then. "Are you ready to come back home, princess?"

"I still have plenty left to accomplish before it comes to that."

Even Isabella was surprised at how sudden Blake appeared in the air. She heard a painful thud when Blake crashed into Narek with strangely perfect accuracy, but the thud when they crashed onto the ground was even more grotesque. She imagined hearing bones cracking, but knew that could not have been true with how quickly they each recovered and stood to face each other.

The horse was somehow already gone. Isabella could hear the hooves fading out as fast as they had faded in.

Narek drew two swords. He swung them with shocking speed, one of the blades always reaching for Blake. He moved backward, too focused on dodging the blows to grab his own sword. Each time, the tips of Narek's swords moved nearer to Blake's skin. Arrow still ready for fire, Isabella shot at Narek. He was much too fast, so he deflected the arrow as if it was not a moving target. Easily and accurately. Though it did not damage, this attempt did give Blake enough time to fall back to her side.

"So the princess fires at the prince." Narek shook his head, a grin stretching across his face. "Maybe it works better for me this way. Rather than trying to take the princess home, I can let the Royal Court know your true intentions. You were not kidnapped. No. You just abandoned your country. You abandoned your throne."

The anger began to boil inside Isabella, but it was already spilling over for Blake. He let out a growl of sorts that Isabella did not recognize of his demeanor. His blade flashed, the longer one nearly breaking Narek's skin, and the shorter one waiting to be drawn. Narek dodged with the same quickness he had in his strikes, and even when Blake drew his second sword, Narek looked comfortable in evading the blows. So comfortable, in fact, that he had no trouble changing the tide. His swords were already in his hands. He only had to begin to strike. He did. Narek and Blake's blades crashed and collided over and over. Neither seemed to have the advantage, but Isabella knew Narek was taunting Blake more than anything.

Rather than stand with her bow, Isabella charged with her sword, ready to join the clash. When she swung her sword at Narek, he blocked it with one of his blades, but as his head turned to face her, Blake kicked him in the stomach, knocking Narek back. Isabella took the chance and swung again, catching the attention of one of Narek's blades. His second took on the full force of both of Blake's swords, which was enough to push Narek from unbalanced to collapse. His back hit the ground – another thud – and Blake pointed his longsword at Narek's neck.

"How's that overconfidence working for you now?" Blake said, moving his blade close enough to cut into Narek's skin like a pinprick.

"No matter what comes out of this, you lose," he said, still smug. "In fact, I could not feel more victorious than I do now."

"Will you still feel victorious when I cut your throat open?"

"Blake!" Isabella put her hand on Blake's shoulder in a plea for restraint. She did not know if her stopping him was out of her disdain for death or her fear for what would happen if word reached her home that Narek had died. The soldiers would know it was at the hand of her and Blake.

"At least you have something working in that head, princess. If I'm dead, I become a martyr. If I live, you become an enemy of the state." Narek snickered. His mockery would never cease. "Well, you'll be seen as an enemy of the state either way."

"Let's just leave him," Isabella said.

"He's only going to make this mission harder. He'll come back after this if we let him."

"If you kill him, I'll have no choice but to stop this mission."

Blake pulled the sword back enough to cease the blade's contact with Narek's skin. The miniscule cut let out a speck of red. But Blake kept his sword close enough to Narek's neck so that their enemy could not safely move at all.

"His life is more important to you than this mission?"

"This mission will mean nothing if he dismantles my family completely," Isabella said, her anger finally starting to boil over. "My family is broken enough. I have to give them a chance to hold on while I'm gone."

"You're already too late for that, princess."

A smile spread across Narek's face as Blake reversed his sword, smashing the metal hilt into Narek's head. His laughter ceased, but his contentedness still peaked through on his unconscious face.

"Let's move on," Blake said.

He did not wait for Isabella to agree, or to speak at all. He did not wait for her to follow him. He simply moved on, sheathing each of his swords.

"Blake, wait a moment!"

"We're without a horse. We don't have time to stall. He'll wake up eventually."

Isabella looked down at Narek, and then forward at Blake's back. Before following him, she decided to flip Narek onto his back so the tops of the trees would not have to look down at his face, left smug even without intention.

Chapter 8

Even with Narek's pompous stare flat against the dirt, his smug face and gloating words burned in her mind.

"I can let the Royal Court know your true intentions. You were not kidnapped. No. You just abandoned your country. You abandoned your throne."

She abandoned *her family*. Isabella thought of her mother, struggling to navigate the conflict against Ceylon and Narek Ashford all on her own. Her little sister and brother, Selli and William, unsure of why she left them behind and living in instability. And Isabella was just wandering through a forest. Her feet crunching twigs. Her legs aching tired.

Just as she was about to ask Blake how much longer they had left in Crescent Forest, it began to brighten. The sun shone through, uninhibited by tall pillars of shade. The trees grew more and more scattered, fewer near them with every step. They weren't walking into a clearing. They were escaping the forest.

"Finally," Isabella muttered.

"We should probably set up camp at the edge of the forest," Blake said. He stopped in his tracks, Isabella kept walking.

"I don't think I can last another minute in that forest," Isabella said.

"You're welcome to rest in the middle of the disputed territory. I'll stay here where I have some cover," Blake said.

He turned back, going a bit deeper into the forest. Isabella stopped walking forward. She took one last look at the treeless landscape. It was bright, but the sky was already reddening. The sun would set soon. Blake was right. They might as well spend this one last night surrounded by the strange forest. She only hoped they were far enough from Narek to avoid another encounter.

Isabella had no reason to argue with Blake on this – the disputed territory was a large plain, so cover would be nearly impossible to find. They set up camp. When they finished, Isabella tried to rest, but sleep would not come. As she tried to force herself to dream, guilt swarmed her thoughts. If Narek wasn't on their trail, he would be back at home, chipping at her mother's power.

When Isabella awoke to the sounds of a fire crackling, she felt more refreshed than she had since they left West Whilsan. Somehow, the sizzling reminded her not of the enflamed attacks on her home. Maybe because now she was finally doing something to stop the creatures that had attacked.

Her eyes opened to Blake cooking what looked to be all that was leftover of the deer. Isabella no longer felt guilty about the animal's death. Or at least that was what she told herself. The need for sustenance overcame that feeling for the moment.

"Morning," Blake said, almost chipper, "you slept unusually well."

"The forest has tired me out, I guess."

She reached for the waterskin. There wasn't a stream nearby, so she would have to be spare in how much she used. A few large drops of water splashed onto a small cloth she carried with her. She wiped her face with the cloth – she had not felt truly clean since they left her home. The dirt she constantly felt on her skin reminded of the lavish life she was sacrificing.

After drinking a small swig of water from the waterskin, Isabella stretched herself out. Stood, walked around, and tried to regain the feeling in her body. Blake eyed her as she walked. She wasn't sure if it was out of concern or suspicion. But what reason would he have to be suspicious of her? As he cooked, she fumbled through her bag. Her hand felt the crinkles of

paper, and she ripped the page out of the bag, not at all careful to keep it whole. Nonetheless, the page came out, undamaged besides the bends and folds that masqueraded it.

Looking more closely now, she was shocked to see how perfectly accurate the drawings of she and Blake were. It made sense for her face to be so exact, but Blake had remained hidden for so long. It seemed unlikely that someone would have such a clear memory of his the lines of his face. She imagined once Narek returned to West Whilsan, he would label her a fugitive just like Blake. He was no longer capturer and she captured. The country knew they were a team; her family would know she left by choice.

She tossed the page into the flames.

"Be careful," Blake said. "Don't want to get ashes all over the meat."

A few ashes of the wanted poster flickered up toward their meal, but none tainted the meat, standing and cooking as if on a spit.

"Do we have any food left after this?" Isabella asked.

"Some. Enough to last at least another day, I'd imagine," Blake said. "If we're careful."

Isabella nodded, her stomach rumbling ferociously. It would be a while before she acclimated to this new life, no longer prim and proper, pampered and fed like a trophy. A trophy. That was all she and her mother were to West Whilsan now. This mission could change that. This mission *would* change that.

The disputed territory had been switching ownership on and off for more than fifteen years. Almost everyone who once lived there had packed their bags and moved. Some to the Northern Territory, some to West or East Whilsan, some to Great Wiles Plain. Isabella thought

some had to have moved into Crescent Forest as well, but given how their only human encounter was Narek and his troops, maybe that wasn't so true.

Moving through the territory though, Isabella disagreed with Blake's thought that there would be no cover. There were abandoned houses almost everywhere. Many were burnt to the ground. Many were broken in. Many dismantled. But some stood whole and mostly undamaged. They stopped by a few in hopes of finding extra provisions, but each place was already pillaged until nothing remained. When they were tired, Isabella knew one of these houses would be their shelter for the night.

In one home, Isabella dug through a small iron chest. It was the only thing unaffected by the flames that left scorch marks and ashes to furnish each building. But even the chest was pillaged. There were a few strands left of what looked to be broken necklaces, some wooden rings, and other items of little worth left. The pillagers took everything that could be traded. Isabella wondered what was left of the woman who wore the wooden rings. Maybe she had fled. Or maybe her corpse was somewhere nearby, hidden in a corner of the small cabin or tossed outside like many had been in the rest of the territory.

When Isabella moved away from the chest and began to look around, she noticed a pile of ashes in the corner. A still smoldering pile of ashes. These flames were recent. An image of the dark-scaled creatures appeared in her mind; she remembered how one conjured flames out of nowhere when she and Blake fought it in the tunnels beneath West Whilsan. Could all of them summon flames, or had her mind just been playing tricks on her?

Isabella awoke from her trance at the sound of a deafening growl. Both Blake and Isabella looked around wildly. There was nothing in the cabin. They ran inside, searching for the source of the sound until smoke in the west caught their eyes.

“Come on!” Isabella said, sprinting off toward the flames.

“You better not just run into conflict! We need to think about this,” Blake said, hurrying after her.

After they made it out of the small town’s worth of houses they had been examining, the territory turned into a massive clearing. Not too far in the distance, five of the shadow-like humanoid creatures were clashing with a single soldier. It looked as if the battle was in standoff. Neither side moved much. The creatures struck, the soldier met the blow. The fact that a lone soldier lasted more than a minute alone was enough to leave Isabella surprised.

As they got closer, she noticed two-pointed spear the soldier wielded. Closer still, the tint of indigo in the soldier’s armor. Even closer, long brown hair sticking out of the helmet.

“Sophia!” Isabella shouted without thinking.

Sophia’s head whipped into Isabella and Blake’s direction. Luckily the shout distracted the creatures just as much as it distracted Sophia. At this point, Isabella stopped and reach from her bow, strung up on the quiver hanging from her back. Blake kept running forward, unsheathing the two swords strapped to his sides.

The creatures shot into action, somehow planning their movements in unison without making a sound. Two of them kept to their fight with Sophia, two charged at Blake, and one sprinted at Isabella.

An arrow already rested against Isabella’s bowstring. She remembered fighting the creatures before. She remembered shooting the deer. Attack the guilty, save the innocent. The creature neared her – it looked so human. All that separated it from a human was the strange thread-like black skin, scaly and covering the creature’s entire body, hiding its facial features.

Never before had she noticed the strange slits where a mouth and eyes would be. But she remembered their claws.

They had the bodies of humans, but they did not run like one. The creature savagely charged at Isabella, claws extended, haunting slit of a mouth wide open screaming.

Arrow released. Another drawn, another released. The creature kept running, an arrow stuck in its shoulder, an arrow stuck in its chest. It barely reacted. It ignored whatever pain the arrowheads caused it. Isabella rushed to put away her bow, replacing it with the long dagger sheathed against her leg. As she held it in front of her, in battle stance as the creature neared, she noticed a glimmer of rose-pink in the metal of the blade, as if it wasn't entirely made of metal.

The creature struck, clawing downward at her face. Isabella jumped back just in time to avoid the talons. Fighting with the dagger felt dangerous; she had to stay close to the creature and its talons at all times. But after some back and forth, she realized she wasn't outmatched.

Sophia's fight was based exclusively in defense. She had tried time and time again to land a blow on the creatures, but every attack essentially bounced off of them. Yet when she looked in Blake's direction, his sword had cut deep into one's stomach, and the other creature he was fighting was already on the ground. He knew something that she didn't.

With each attack her opponents attempted, Sophia stabbed at the palm with a point of her spear. It was ineffective, but, to her, it was worth the attempt. Successful or not, she blocked each of the attacks. Then both charged at once. Her spear blocked one blow, but as she moved to block the next, she felt a searing pain near her hip. The creature had clawed clear through her armor.

"Isabella!" Blake shouted, unaware of Sophia's trouble, but noticing Isabella's instantly.

Even Sophia hardly noticed her wound after hearing Isabella's agonizing, ear-splitting cry.

Isabella fell back on her knees. She barely prevented a full collapse from the shock of the pain digging deep into her right shoulder. Even slightly moving her right hand increased the throbbing. This was a kind of hurt she had never felt, as aggressive physically as the loss of Liam had been emotionally. She stared at the wound. It was deeper than she could've anticipated. She drew her eyes away in a second; whether it was because the wound's grotesqueness or her instinct to focus on her opponent, she wasn't sure. The creature opened its mouth wide, fangs long and yellow appearing as it pushed forward to bite her. She gripped the dagger tightly with her left hand and thrust it forward.

The next scream from the creature was deafening. As the dagger cut into the beast's throat, Isabella saw the first glimmer of feeling on its face. Pain in its eyes. Its eyes reflected hers.

Then it fell to the ground. Isabella did too.

Chapter 9

As soon as Isabella awoke, she put her weight on her right arm, trying to lift herself up from the mat she lay on. Instantly, her arm buckled under her weight, and her shoulder renewed in throbbing bursts of pain. Her face scrunched in a wince, and a high-pitched groan fled from her mouth.

“Don’t move,” Sophia said, coming into Isabella’s still-blurry vision. “Your shoulder needs more time to heal, and you still need to rest.”

Isabella focused her eyes, noticing bandages on Sophia’s hip, her forehead, and her arm. But Liam’s sister acted as if no pain burdened her. Red bled through the bandage on Sophia’s forehead. Isabella could not tell if the blood was fresh.

“Where’s Blake?” Isabella croaked, quickly realizing how parched she was.

Sophia handed her a waterskin before speaking. Isabella drank plenty, so focused on the rehydration that she would not have heard Sophia’s answer anyway.

“He’s in another tent tending to one of my surviving men,” Sophia said when Isabella finished.

“Your men? Where were they before? When we were fighting the creatures.”

“The Threaders? I had my men pull back shortly after the battle started, before you arrived. We were already crippled after a previous encounter. We never would have survived the battle.”

This time Isabella pushed upward with her left arm, finally able to bring herself into a seated position. She stared at Sophia. It had been a long time since they had really talked – there were meetings here and there, but nothing more than a casual conversation for political purposes; the royal families of East and West Whilsan had to appear peaceful. But beyond a few things

Liam had said, she knew nothing about the person Sophia had become. She certainly never expected her to be a warrior, one who led her own men. No longer was she timid and small. Sophia looked powerful, from the confidence on her face to the muscles rippling under the armor she wore even outside battle. Losing her brother, fighting in this war – it had changed her.

“So you sacrificed yourself? You’re part of the royal family. With Liam gone, you’re the heir. How can you risk your life like that?”

Even as Isabella spoke, she realized how much she doubted Sophia’s position as heir. After all, Isabella and her mother lost their power to an interim king before they even thought to protest it.

“A general has to show her troops her bravery.” Another thought of shock sped through Isabella’s mind. A general? “Besides, from what Blake has told me, you too are sacrificing yourself.”

Something in Sophia’s voice betrayed anger, and when she quickly turned away, Isabella could tell she was hiding something. She walked to the other side of the tent, rummaged through some sort of chest. Isabella couldn’t tell – Sophia’s back faced her. So instead, Isabella removed the cloth tied around her wound. It still hurt, but it looked nothing like before. Not grotesque, not pulsing with blood. It looked like a wound she would have gotten playing around as a kid. This was not the battle wound that made her cry out.

“How long have I been out?” Isabella asked.

“Half a day,” Sophia said, back still to Isabella.

Half a day was not enough time for that deep of a wound to make this much progress. She quickly covered it back up, as if the progress was something she needed to hide. Maybe it

was. Had she and Sophia's positions been reversed, she would have been suspicious of such fast healing. That could have been what Sophia was hiding. Suspicion.

"What is it, Sophia?"

"What is what?" Sophia said, now turning, anger still written in the creases of her battled but beautiful face.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Not at all," Sophia said. "Blake will be in to see you soon. I'll tell him you've woken up."

That was that. Beyond ensuring Isabella did not make her injury any worse – not that it mattered anymore since it would likely heal by the next day – Sophia wanted nothing to do with her. If what Sophia said was true, Isabella and Blake had saved her life. Whether or not she was grateful, Isabella expected she would at least be more welcoming. Then again, based on the grandness of the room, ornamented and glowing with royal blues, Isabella knew she had to be in Sophia's tent. Only the general and heir would rest in such an extravagant quarters on the battlefield. To Isabella, Sophia's feelings were muddled and indecipherable.

Alone, Isabella once again tried to lift herself up. This time she used both arms and pushed herself into a seated position. She was surprised to find how much her right arm still hurt from the effort, even though to her eyes, it seemed as if it was almost healed. Then, using just her legs and left arm, she pushed herself to stand. Once free of the blankets that had covered her on the mat, Isabella noticed that someone had changed her clothes. She was no longer wearing the light armor she had traveled in, but was instead in a soft, silk nightgown that didn't belong to her. It reminded her of the nightgowns she would have slept in at home. In a bed, not on a mat.

In her room, not in her fiancé's sister's tent. Sophia must have loaned the gown to her. Again, her understanding of Sophia's feelings grew more muddled.

The tent flap swung casually as Blake stepped inside. Unlike Isabella and Sophia, he was unharmed and unbandaged. Isabella knew he was an experienced fighter, but she could not hide her shock at seeing him unscathed. He was just as surprised to see her standing.

"You should be resting," he said, his voice soft in a way she had never heard it.

"I'm all right."

Blake stepped toward her before she had a chance to step away from the mat. He reached toward the bandage on her shoulder before she had a chance to tell him to stop. He gently pulled it back before she had a chance to explain.

"It's almost healed," he said.

There was only a hint of surprise in his voice, though Isabella had already winced in fear of an accusation. She knew how extraordinary this was.

"Does this happen often?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I've never been wounded like this before."

"Do your wounds always heal this quickly?"

She shook her head.

"What about your family? Have you ever seen any of them heal from a wound?"

"Nothing like this."

Blake held her arm, examining the wound more closely. His touch brought back her wince – it was still tender. When his grey-blue eyes glanced up at her face, he saw the tension causing her skin to crease, and his touch immediately softened.

"How much does it hurt?" he asked.

"I feel like it shouldn't hurt this much anymore."

Blake's look of concern morphed into a grin; he had the look of a child just making a discovery, solving a puzzle. He released her arm and gestured for her to sit back down on the mat. She was hesitant at first, remembering the pain she had felt trying to stand. But when he sat, she did too.

"How much do you know about magic?" he asked.

It was Isabella's turn to grin.

"I've heard stories, rumors," she said.

"You act as if it isn't real. You've seen the Threaders. You saw what they did to your home."

"Because they're monsters," Isabella said. She stood again, not even acknowledging the pain that coursed through her with the pressure on her wound. She walked away, finding herself mimicking Sophia when she kept her back turned to hide whatever she was feeling. But she could not speak without seeing Blake's expression. She whipped back around to face him. "Since when have they had a name? You and Sophia throw the word out as if it's common knowledge. *Threaders*. Since when did we know anything about them?"

"There's a lot I haven't told you yet, Isabella," he said. "I explained some things to Sophia. Those are things I need to tell you. But there's much more that we need to talk about."

He looked at her, his eyes puddles of concern. She could see his arms and legs fidget, as if he wanted to move, to stand and walk toward her. The confidence he had on the battlefield vanished, leaving his movements hesitant and unsure. There was something deeper in him than just guilt. It made him look younger, somehow erasing the faint scars from battle that lined his skin.

"Why have you waited this long?"

"This mission, this journey... No. This *war* is a lot more complex than you know," Blake said. "I didn't want to overwhelm you with too much too quickly."

She stepped toward him, reaching out her left hand – she tried to calm herself enough to remember not to use her right when she could avoid it. Her hand wavered in the air for a moment, as he looked from her hand to her face and back to the hand. He took it.

"Let's go for a walk around camp. You'll tell me everything."

Chapter 10

As Isabella tore back the flap of the general's tent, she was surprised to find that the light of the sun did not warm her skin. It was night. She didn't know how late, but the moon shone where she thought the sun would. It made sense. Sophia said she had been unconscious for half a day. And the sun had been bright when darkness overtook her.

"Why is the entire camp awake?" Isabella asked.

There were soldiers moving about – carrying supplies, standing guard, sitting around the fire with food. The torchlight was not enough to mimic daylight, but the energy of the camp seemed just as vibrant as it would in the middle of the day.

"Only half of the soldiers are awake," Blake said. "Sophia has them run on day and night shifts. The Threaders have been known to attack in the middle of the night."

The number of blue tents and grey-and-blue clad soldiers shocked Isabella – this was only half of Sophia's troops. East Whilsan seemed to be taking the threat of the Threaders much more seriously than West Whilsan. Isabella didn't understand. East Whilsan had lost their heir to the throne, but West Whilsan had lost a king, an heir, and the fiancé to the princess. But those losses had all been to Isabella's family. The Ashfords wouldn't care until something happened to them. Just another reason for Isabella to wish for the dethroning of the interim king Ceylon Ashford.

"So, go ahead," Isabella said. "Start explaining."

They were strolling through the labyrinth of tents, dodging the lines of soldiers marching with so much more purpose than Isabella and Blake.

"Maybe we should move farther away from the soldiers before we talk," Blake said, glancing around.

He saw Sophia standing inside a large tent, in front of a table and surrounded by men who looked to be her lieutenants. She looked to be planning some sort of mission, but her eyes were locked on Isabella. After all, Isabella should not have been well enough to be walking around like this. The pair hoped Sophia would not question this later.

"I thought you already discussed some things with Sophia. You can at least explain that."

"I told *Sophia*. I'm not about to tell her soldiers. There are some things only those in power need to know," Blake said. "There will be a time for these troops to know. That time has yet to come."

"Are you claiming a princess who lost her right to the throne and a wanderer are in power?" Isabella said.

She could not suppress a small chuckle. A mixture of amusement and deeper suspicion built in her. Blake clearly had a book of secrets he wasn't telling her, but she could not help but think he took himself too seriously at times. Who was he in all of this?

"A princess without a seat on the throne is still a princess," Blake said.

Nothing about his position. Isabella began to wonder if he really planned on explaining anything.

The village of tents was vast for a temporary encampment, but, before long, Isabella and Blake found themselves on the edge. There were guards near them, looking at them. They were out of earshot though. As long as they did not approach, the two could talk freely.

Blake dropped right down to the ground, sitting comfortably on a patch of grass. Isabella hesitated. She had a coat to keep her warm, but besides that, she was only wearing the nightgown. It was expensive – it didn't belong in the grass. But she had spent more than a week

living in the wilderness. She was getting used to this life without concern for silk clothing and finely crafted chairs that her whole body could sink into. The grass would be just fine.

"Let's start with magic," Blake said.

He said with such normalcy; he might as well have been talking about what to have for breakfast. Whether or not Isabella believed it, Blake thought magic was real.

"Go ahead," Isabella said.

"So, your shoulder healed unusually fast. Anyone with eyes would know that your wound should not have closed up in half a day," Blake said. "That's because you have some sort of magic property. Hold out your hand."

Isabella did. She pulled it back a moment later though, as soon as Blake unsheathed a dagger hanging along his waist.

"I'm not going to cut deep," Blake said.

Suspicious aside, she trusted Blake enough to believe that. He had stopped within sight of guards after all. She held her hand out, awaiting the cut, unafraid – it would be nothing compared to the pain she felt yesterday. Blake gripped her wrist. It wasn't a gentle hold, just tight enough to make sure she did not flinch. Her eyes closed, she felt the blade slide gently from the center to the edge of her palm. She winced, but she did not flinch. Blake could have done this without even grabbing her wrist. When she opened her eyes and looked, the wound was open and bleeding.

"It's not healing," Isabella said.

"Give it a minute. I don't think you heal instantly," Blake said. "So you seem to have some sort of healing magic. But that might not be all the magic you have. You said archery was a sort of sport in your family, right?"

Isabella nodded. "We're all rather good. I bested my father and brother every time, but they would best most others."

"And how much did you have to practice before you could best them?"

Isabella thought, but she only remembered how easily the bow fit into her hands. It was an extension of herself. It was part of her. She could not remember a time when she could not best them.

"You were always able to best them?" Blake asked, sensing her thoughts. She nodded. "See, Isabella, magic doesn't always take the form we expect. The legends make it sound flashy, powerful, unimaginable. But magic can be as simple as natural talent."

"You're saying I can shoot an arrow because I have magic?"

"I'm saying you can hit any target with an arrow without difficulty because you have magic," Blake said. "Why did you think you were such a natural?"

This was something Isabella did not believe. But she did not dispel the idea entirely, because when she looked down, the cut on her hand was slowly stitching itself shut. Blake noticed it too.

"You may not believe me about your archery, but you have to believe in your healing," he said, smirking. "Magic can be almost anything. There are people who have a natural talent, like you. There are people that are somehow stronger than the average human. Some who are faster, who move at an unparalleled speed."

His eyes glimmered in the torchlight as he discussed the magic. It made him believe in something beyond himself, as if he looked to magic as his own higher power. Her wound soon was nothing more than a paper cut.

"Then, of course, magic can be more powerful," Blake went on. "There are people who can control the elements. Remember when the Threader we fought in West Whilsan summoned fire?"

Of course she remembered. But the Threaders they fought with Sophia had not done conjured flames in the battle. It could have been an illusion. Some sort of weapon.

"They can't all do that, but magic gifts some of them just like it gifts some people," Blake said. "There are even people who can summon creatures. People who can *create* creatures. Which is what I believe happened with the Threaders."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a small sketchbook. Isabella had never before noticed how he kept this hidden in his clothes. As he quickly flipped through the pages, Isabella wondered if he was speaking the truth. Could he have magic that gave him his talent for drawing? What would it mean if magic had so much to do with who people were? Magic might as well control fate if it was what gave people their passions and their talents.

Blake finally stopped moving through his beautiful, yet simple sketches. He came upon a much more detailed one. A drawing that was, unquestionably, a Threader. It looked as if it was ready to leap off the page and attack, its claws and hauntingly dead eyes prepared to murder without a second thought.

"Threader, I think, were once humans," Blake said.

"You think those *creatures* are people?" Isabella said, suddenly rising to her feet. "They took my family."

"Humans have been known to do cruel things, Isabella." Blake stood, still holding his sketchbook as he followed her back into camp. "I think someone created the creatures using human bodies, and they are using them as their pawns."

Isabella halted, turning to face him, suspicion burning into aggression. "How do you know they're called Threaders? How do you come up with these ideas?" she asked. "You know so much more than anyone else. But how?"

"I've been traveling through this land for many years. I have seen things that no one else has seen. I know what we're dealing with, Isabella."

"Is that why you called yourself a person of power? Because of what you know? These Threaders, these creatures... they can't be people. I refuse to believe that," she said, staring down at her hand, now completely healed. "And just because my hand is healed, it doesn't mean magic is real."

She stormed off, her eyes unable to move away from her healed palm. Dried blood stained her skin, reminding her that she had been cut. And though she wanted to deny it, magic was real.

Outline for the Remaining Chapters

Chapter 11

Sophia tells Isabella that it's time she and Blake leave the camp, and Sophia is going to join them until they reach the Northern Territory. They ride north, and Blake notices a pillar of smoke northeast. He says it is in the exact location of the Centaur Village. They ride to the village to find it in ruins. Blake finds a few survivors – centaurs that he knows well. Blake explains that he and his family were close allies of the village in the past. The centaurs explain that a group of about fifty soldiers in green armor led by a woman raided the village.

Chapter 12

After helping the survivors, the trio leaves the Centaur Village and heads west to get back on track. On the way, they encounter a group of eight in green armor. Blake advances on them without thinking, forcing Sophia and Isabella to join him in the fight. They eliminate six of the soldiers, but two – a woman and a man – remain. The fight continues, and Isabella notices that the man moves extremely fast, reminding her of the example Blake gave of increased speed being a potential type of magic. The fight is a draw. The man holds off the trio while the woman escapes, and with his increased speed, the man easily gets away.

Chapter 13

Blake and Isabella reach the gates of the Northern Territory. They notice that the gate is not guarded by humans, but Threaders. Sophia departs, and Blake and Isabella sneak into the country alone. Blake says when he saw the Threaders transporting Liam, they were headed to the Northern Territory capital. They find a home to stay in while searching for Liam.

Chapter 14

Isabella and Blake find the building that appears to be the Threader headquarters. They begin making plans to break into the building to save Liam. While spying, they see that both Isabella's brother and father are also being held in the headquarters.

Chapter 15

Their attempt to sneak into the building fails, and the leader of the Threaders, Dementhaus, negotiates with them. He says he will release Isabella's family if she and Blake go to Rose Island to steal the Midnight Rose, which has been described in legends as a source of deep magic.

Chapter 16

Blake and Isabella head west to the docks so that they can find a boat and get to Rose Island. While Blake plans to steal one of the boats, Isabella convinces him to ask the family running the docks. Isabella offers them repayment from her country. The family, a woman named Alicia, a man named Lincoln, and their son Hawk, take them to Rose Island.

Chapter 17

Isabella and Blake get to know Alicia, Lincoln, and Hawk while on the boat. They discover that Alicia and Hawk both have powerful magic. Hawk claims he senses something special in Isabella, but she denies this.

Chapter 18

They arrive at the island, where they quickly meet the woman who governs it, Amara. Amara takes them to her home, where she reveals that Isabella is the heir to the Midnight Rose's

magic. Amara tries to introduce her to the Spirit of the Rose, but Isabella refuses, leaving the house and hurrying into town.

Chapter 19

While Isabella is alone in town, she debates what to do about the Midnight Rose that Dementhaus wants her to bring in exchange for her family. She runs into the blacksmith Eretri, a genderqueer of color. Eretri tells Isabella about life in the Northern Territory, and how the Threaders planned to execute Eretri before the blacksmith was able to escape to Rose Island. The people on the island accepted Eretri as one of their own, and the blacksmith was freed of the judgment and persecution faced on the mainland. This encounter makes Isabella realize that she cannot betray the island and its people.

Chapter 20

Isabella returns to Amara's home, where Amara, Blake, Alicia, Lincoln, Hawk, and the Spirit have been waiting. Isabella isn't sure she wants to tell Blake of her decision, because she doesn't know if he'll agree. So she meets the Spirit and learns more about her power over the course of a week. The Spirit uses her magic to show Isabella a vision of her home: Sophia has arrived in West Whilsan and has convinced Elisa to take a stand against the Ashford family. Tensions are building over West Whilsan's contested throne.

Chapter 21

An army begins an attack on Rose Island. Hawk, Alicia, Amara, and other powerful mages try to use magic to stop the boats from arriving, but the enemy has powerful mages as well. The battle mainly occurs on the beach, where Isabella, Blake, Hawk, Lincoln, Alicia, Amara, Eretri, and other troops fight the invaders. During the attack, Isabella encounters the

woman who they fought near the Centaur Village. The man with magic speed that was with her before is nowhere to be found, and the troops are wearing black armor.

Chapter 22

The woman moves past Isabella and heads toward Amara's home, where the Midnight Rose is held. Isabella leaves the beach to pursue the woman. She catches up to her as the woman enters Amara's home. They duel. Isabella learns that the woman's name is Celia, and she is wife to Maxwell, the man leading the attack. After an even match, a horn sounds, which Celia recognizes as a signal to retreat. She flees the building, Isabella hurrying in pursuit.

Chapter 23

Isabella fights alongside her comrades as the enemy tries to escape. On the beach, Isabella follows Celia to Maxwell, where she tries to battle them both, Blake by her side. Maxwell reveals he has magic, which Isabella's magic allies help her deflect. This battle lasts a while. Maxwell nearly kills Isabella, but Eretri joins the fight in time to save her. The Rose Island troops deal heavy casualties, but Maxwell, Celia, and a large portion of their troops make it out alive.

Chapter 24

Blake and Isabella stay at the island a while longer. During this time, the Spirit and Amara tell Isabella who Celia is. She was heir to the Midnight Rose before Isabella, but during Celia's training, the Spirit realized she was the wrong choice. They banished Celia from the island. This is when they named Isabella heir. The reason Isabella's wound healed after the fight against the Threaders in the disputed territory is because the Midnight Rose's magic had begun to join with Isabella. The magic will gradually increase in power the longer Isabella is heir.

Chapter 25

Isabella and Blake plan to leave, worried that Dementhaus won't tolerate the amount of time they spent away. After the time spent on the island, Isabella trusts Blake enough to explain why she can't give Dementhaus the rose. He agrees. They decide to bring Hawk, Alicia, and Lincoln so they can lead a surprise attack against the Threaders. Isabella asks Eretri to come, but Eretri isn't ready to leave the island yet. Eretri gifts Isabella a dagger before they leave.

Chapter 26

The five camp at the docks, ironing out their plan. One night, a nightmare of the Threaders killing Liam awakens Isabella from her sleep. She realizes Blake is missing, though it is his watch. She goes to look for him. When she finds him, he claims that he heard a noise and was trying to track it.

Chapter 27

The surprise attack fails. They arrive to find Dementhaus in front of the three prisoners – her fiancé Liam, her father Aaron, and her brother James. A Threader stands behind each prisoner, ready to kill on command. Isabella's rage ignites the magic of the Midnight Rose, and she is engulfed in rose fire. She defeats many of the Threaders – the rose fire is incredibly powerful against them – but Dementhaus kills Aaron before she can save him.

Chapter 28

Dementhaus escapes, and Isabella succeeds in saving Liam and James. Now a group of seven, they begin traveling south toward West Whilsan. Isabella and James deal with their grief from losing their father. The combination of the grief and the time away from Liam creates a

tension in his and Isabella's relationship. When they reach the disputed territory, a villager lets them know that the Ashford family has occupied West Whilsan.

Chapter 29

Alicia and Lincoln go back to Rose Island to get reinforcements to help Isabella's family retake West Whilsan. Meanwhile, the rest of the group heads to East Whilsan so Liam can petition his family to send reinforcements as well. On the way, they encounter a group of Threaders terrorizing a village. Isabella tries to conjure her rose fire, but cannot. The Threaders seem to have grown more powerful; weapons barely do any damage. The fight seems hopeless.

Chapter 30

Isabella kills one of the Threaders with the dagger Eretri gave her. Hawk senses rose fire magic in the dagger. He tries to imitate the rose fire, and succeeds in conjuring enough of it to defeat some of the Threaders and force them to retreat.

Chapter 31

The group arrives in East Whilsan, and Liam's father Leo insists on celebrating his son's return. This delays their request for reinforcements, as Leo refuses to discuss their request until after the celebration. Leo invites Sophia to return for the celebration – he assumes she is still with her troops in the disputed territory.

Chapter 32

The general Sophia left in her stead arrives, and explains that she is in West Whilsan. Leo is conflicted by his daughter betraying his orders, but ultimately agrees to send reinforcements to West Whilsan to aid her and at his son's request.

Chapter 33

Liam's father requires that Liam stay with his country's troops. Isabella and Liam say goodbye alone, and they realize that their relationship is still fractured. Isabella, Blake, James, and Hawk travel south. They plan to sneak back into the West Whilsan capital the same way Isabella and Blake initially snuck out.

Chapter 34

They successfully sneak in through the passage, since the Ashford family did not know of it. In the capital, they find that Isabella's mother, her siblings, Sophia, and some of the family's loyal supporters are defending a base at the Capital Bell Tower and the square surrounding it. James and Isabella reunite with their family, but they also have to tell them of Aaron's death.

Chapter 35

They barely defend another assault on their base at the Capital Bell Tower. Isabella encounters Narek, who she battles and questions for his actions. The pressure on the Ashford forces from both Rose Island's troops in the north and East Whilsan's troops in the east is enough to weaken Ceylon Ashford's hold on West Whilsan. But Isabella's family learns that the Ashford forces have allies from Ails. Isabella recalls Narek's discussion with some Ails troops about surrendering land to West Whilsan when she and Blake saw him in Ails.

Chapter 36

Isabella and her allies lead an attack on the mansion where her family used to live and where the Ashfords are now living. Narek betrays his father during the attack, causing Ceylon's death and Isabella's family's return to power.

Chapter 37

Maxwell's army arrives, marching on West Whilsan to take advantage of its time of weakness. This time, the Threaders are marching alongside him. Vairx, the man with increased speed, appears before Isabella and her friends head out to join the battle against Maxwell. Isabella initially goes to attack him, but Blake stops her and he embraces Vairx. Vairx tells Blake that Maxwell and Celia have split, and he convinces Blake to leave with him to go back to Celia. Blake and Vairx leave together; though Isabella feels betrayed and confused, she lets them go.

Chapter 38

Elisa receives word that her home country, Ocelena has rebelled against Ails, which annexed it many years ago. This distracts Ceylon Ashford's remaining supporters, who go to quell the rebellion. This leaves West Whilsan – along with its allies from Rose Island and East Whilsan – safe to deal exclusively with Maxwell's forces.

Chapter 39

Isabella, Liam, Hawk, Alicia, Lincoln, Eretri, Amara, James, Narek, and Sophia lead the troops against Maxwell and the Threaders. Eretri has brought a selection of weapons forged in rose fire to help fight the Threaders.

Chapter 40

The group reaches Maxwell and Dementhaus, who they nearly defeat. Then Maxwell, using his magic, absorbs many of the Threaders – including Dementhaus. He becomes a half-human, half-Threader creature.

Chapter 41

Maxwell wreaks havoc with his new powers, even killing some of his own men. Isabella regains control over her rose fire, which subdues him. Maxwell finally decides to flee with his surviving generals, troops, and the remaining Threaders alongside him.

Chapter 42

Rose Island and East Whilsan's armies return home. Isabella and her family try to put their country back together. Elisa takes the throne, and James takes a position as lead general. Elisa and her army move their focus to helping Ocelena in its rebellion against Ails.

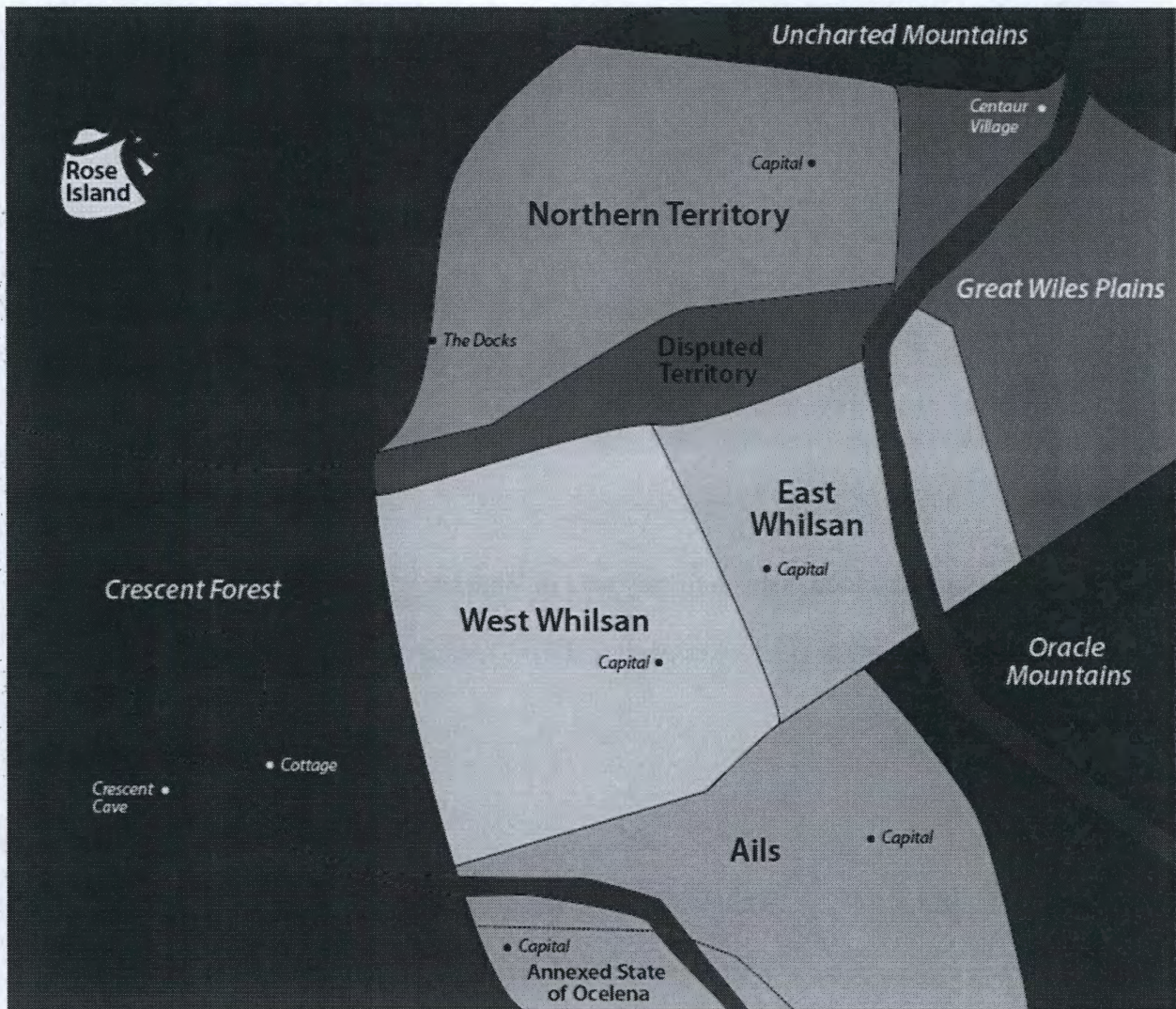
Chapter 43

Liam tries to convince Isabella to stay safe in Whilsan with him, but she can't stop thinking about the challenges ahead: Maxwell and his Threaders, and Celia's army, which includes Blake and Vairx.

Chapter 44

Isabella decides to leave West Whilsan so she can train with the Spirit at Rose Island. She says her goodbyes to her family. Still hopeful that Isabella and Liam can be as happy as they were together before the conflict began, Liam accompanies Isabella on her journey.

Great Wiles Map



Character Glossary

Aaron	King of West Whilsan. Lost in the first Threader raid.
Alicia	Mother to Hawk, wife to Lincoln. A powerful mage. She and her family reside in the docks at the west end of the Northern Territory.
Amara	Governs Rose Island. Adviser to the Spirit of the Rose.
Blake	Last surviving member of his family. Friend of Liam. Convinces Isabella to join him in search of Liam.
Celia	Wife to Maxwell. Former heir to the Midnight Rose.
Ceylon Ashford	Father to Narek. Interim king of West Whilsan.
Dementhaus	Leader of the Threaders.
Elisa	Queen of West Whilsan. Mother to James, Isabella, William, and Selli. Wife of Aaron. Former medic in the Ocelena army.
Eretri	Rose Island's blacksmith.
Hawk	Young son of Alicia and Lincoln. A powerful mage.
Isabella	Princess of West Whilsan. Daughter of Elisa and Aaron. Sister of James, William, and Selli. Heir to the Midnight Rose.
James	Prince of West Whilsan. Daughter of Elisa and Aaron. Brother of Isabella, William, and Selli. Lost in the second Threader raid.
Leo	King of East Whilsan. Father to Sophia and Liam.
Liam	Prince of East Whilsan. Isabella's fiancé. Son of Leo. Brother of Sophia. Lost in the third Threader raid.
Lincoln	Farther to Hawk, husband of Alicia. He and his family reside in the docks at the west end of the Northern Territory.
Maxwell	Husband to Celia. Leader of an army composed of both men and Threaders.
Narek Ashford	Son of Ceylon.
Selli	Princess of West Whilsan. Daughter of Elisa and Aaron. Sister of James, Isabella, and William.

Sophia	Princess and lead general of East Whilsan. Daughter of Leo. Sister of Liam.
The Spirit	Spirit of the Midnight Rose. The personification of the rose's power.
Threaders	Creatures of unknown origin. Led by Dementhaus. Servants to Maxwell.
Vairx	Soldier under Celia's command. Has increased speed magic.
William	Prince of West Whilsan. Son of Elisa and Aaron. Brother of James, Isabella, and Selli.